

matt d wrye

the
ones
you knew
would come

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CHAPTER ONE

When discussing Star Trek, there are basically two schools of thought concerning the two major Captains. You could be grouped into the Captain Kirk category (from the original series) or the Captain Picard category (from *The Next Generation*). Captain James T. Kirk was edgy, and cocky at times. He was the ultimate “shoot first and ask questions later” kind of Captain. On the other hand you have Captain Jean-Luc Picard. This Captain was more cerebral, and more patient. He cared more about the environments within which he found himself. He explored every possible option before he ever took a shot. Kirk fans and Picard fans were basically different people. This was all accepted as fact (as far as Alex was concerned). The differences in these two groups could easily divide a room. Alex knew he was a Picard man, plain and simple. He never held it against someone for being a Kirk-type, but he definitely took note of it and kept a close eye on that person, just to be safe.

The television in the corner of the small dorm room went about its usual business, just as it always did this time of day as most of the residents of the Haile University building napped until their afternoon classes began. Alex Kinnet was no different. It wasn't as if he needed to be awake to appreciate the episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that was on right now anyway. He had seen them all and could just as easily experience the show from within his daydreams. He drifted in and out of the deck of the *Enterprise* as its Captain and crew battled yet another not-so-deadly foe. Alex found himself just to the right of the Captain, eagerly awaiting his orders to fire at their mutual enemy. For most, this was just another normal dream. Not for Alex.

Alex's dreams were different. He would become *aware* during his dreams and was able to control them more than most people. He wasn't forced to try and interpret bits and pieces of cloudy memories the next morning. If he remembered any of his dream, he remembered all of it. It often proved to be more of a curse than a blessing. He often spent the rest of the day attempting to understand what each dream meant.

While this particular dream would qualify as neither nightmare nor fantasy, Alex thoroughly enjoyed his adventures through space with the crew of the *Enterprise*. It was enough to help him relax and take his mind off of the rest of the world so eager to make him concentrate. The credits were about to roll when he was brought back to reality by a voice quite unlike any angel in Heaven.

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“Wake up, you frickin’ loser!” shouted a voice from Alex’s doorway.

Alex awoke to the not so pleasant words of his friend, Fax, staring down at him. Sure, there were a few variations on Fax’s morning rants, sometimes including a plethora of curse words that ultimately didn’t add to or take away from the overall implied meaning of “Get up,” but most of the time it was simply, “Wake up, you frickin’ loser!”

“How in the hell can you watch this crap every damn day?” Fax said as he stared at Alex’s television.

“Well, Fax, in case you haven’t noticed I wasn’t watching it. I was sleeping, right up until some asshole walked in and started talking.”

The look on John Francis Faxon’s (Fax for short) face was that of a triumphant hunter dragging his prize kill back across a sea of onlookers, proudly displaying that which he had so fearlessly conquered.

“I honestly don’t know what makes you so happy about waking me up like that.”

Fax just smiled.

Alex rolled back over on his bed and attempted to beam back aboard the Enterprise as if Fax had never come in, but nothing happened. He accepted that the fight for sleep was over.

“You win. I’m up,” Alex said as he rolled back around to face Fax. “Why are you here?”

There was never really a reason for Fax coming by Alex’s dorm room like he did, but he did. Alex felt his eyes getting heavy and wondered if his current foul mood would send him into a bad dream if he happened to fall back asleep. He should have known better than to worry about getting the chance to fall back asleep. John Faxon would rather spend an entire afternoon *lying* about what he planned to do than ever admit he had no plan at all.

“For us today, my friend,” Fax proclaimed in a rather regal tone, “I have prepared a fact-finding mission about a rather interesting young specimen in the food court.”

“Oh come on,” Alex sighed as he pulled his blankets over his face. “You know I don’t want to go with you to the damn food court and watch you hit on women.”

“Hit on women?”

Fax, who had been gazing out of the room’s solitary tiny window, turned back around to Alex and covered his face with his hands, obviously disgusted with his friend’s lack of ambition.

“How can you call it that? I told you that this is a fact-finding mission. Don’t try and cheapen it by calling it something like that, ok?”

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Alex calmly replied from under the covers, "I couldn't cheapen it if I had to, and you know it. It was cheap long before you brought me into it. Just go and find a girl. You don't need me to do that. You seem to be doing well on your own."

Alex stared up at Fax as he waited for his response. Everything Alex said was true. Fax was what some have often referred to as a "ladies' man." He stood 6'3" with almost perfectly proportioned shoulders and near perfect "messy" hair. Alex always found it hard to explain how something messy could be perfect, but if it were possible, Fax had done it. He looked like an all-star athlete of some kind, but he never really got into sports. He was more of a hunter. To put it simply, the man enjoyed his women. And there was no doubting that they enjoyed Fax. Something about him, whether it was his good looks or suave personality and charm, made him irresistible to almost anyone he met.

Alex was a little different. He was an even six feet tall, which was a little taller than average. He weighed about 175 lbs, which was a little lighter than average. His hair wasn't messy, it was average. Most everything about Alex was right in the middle of the curve. Alex wasn't ugly, he was damn near cute, just a little more reserved than someone like Fax. He wasn't a hunter. He never bothered with the chase. He wanted a girlfriend, as long as it wasn't too much work. Fax lived out every fantasy he had in real life. Alex lived out his inside of his head. Alex was fairly certain that his own methods weren't as much fun as Fax's, but he had much more control over the situation in his dreams. It seemed like the safe way to go about things for the time being.

Fax thought for a moment and then stared Alex right in the eyes and said, "I go for the chase. That's half of the fun."

Alex paused as they stared at each other for a few moments, attempting to fully understand what Fax just said.

"I think our definitions of fun are different," Alex laughed.

"Hey, don't worry about my methods, okay? Today's mission is to find a woman for you. You need to expand your horizons a little. I mean, this dorm room is cool and everything, but come on."

Alex never took offense to any of Fax's comments about his dateless life and his less than impressive social circle. He assumed he wasn't even in any social circles. He knew that Fax meant well, and frankly, Alex wanted to find a girlfriend. It just had to be the right one.

"I'm not in the mood for chasing today, Fax"

"Not in the mood?" Fax asked with a very confused look on his face. "You don't *get in the mood* to brush your teeth in the morning, do you? You don't *get in the mood* to get dressed, do you? And you sure as hell don't *get in the mood* to get up and go to class in the mornings... obviously."

"CRAP!" shouted Alex. His Economics class started at 11:30 and he was already late. "How can you manage to wake me up on time and still run your trap long enough to make me late to my 11:30!"

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Fax pondered for a moment as Alex scurried around the room gathering his things.

"It's a gift, I suppose," Fax said as he smiled. "Those of us with the real talent just do it without even thinking. I would love to explain it to you sometime."

"Thanks a lot. Maybe that's what my class will be about today while I'm standing here listening to you," Alex groaned as he crammed a few books and some paper into his bag.

"Oh come on," Fax said as his smile grew even wider on his face. "A class about me? You're just a sophomore, man. You aren't ready for a class on me. I'm thinking it would be a Junior-level at least."

Alex was already out of the door before Fax could finish his sentence, not that it stopped him from finishing it at all. Alex heard Fax talking, but couldn't make out what he had said as the doors to the elevator closed on his way to the lobby. As he stood there on his way down, he realized that there was really no reason for this day to seem any different from any other day. Fax often came by to disturb Alex while he napped. Alex always wished he hadn't. Fax always started in about the day's mission as if Alex had jumped up and enthusiastically asked "Hey buddy! What are we doing today?" and Alex always ran to his 11:30 class knowing the entire time that he was already late.

CHAPTER TWO

It never really made much sense to Alex why he always rushed to get to his classes on time. None of his professors ever cared if he was there, and Alex definitely wasn't enthusiastic enough about learning to fight for a seat in the front row. But still he raced, day after day, trying to get there on time. His tardiness had become so common that several of his fellow *back-row warriors* celebrated each time Alex stumbled through the door. As usual, a low round of applause started up amongst his fans as he pushed open the door to his 11:30 Economics class at an impressive fifteen minutes late.

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“Good morning, Mr. Kinnet,” announced a teacher’s voice from the front of the room. “It is quite an honor that you decided to join us today.”

The classroom quietly laughed as Alex found his way into the seat nearest the door he just walked through, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had just taken place.

Alex knew that his teacher’s rant was far from over. Professor Hamlin was his Economics teacher and a real pain in the ass. He could not have been more than five and a half feet tall, but had the ego of a giant. He looked like a college professor from 70’s movies with his receding hairline, leather briefcase, and wool coat, complete with leather patches on the elbow. Alex often wondered if somewhere there was a secret store for college professors only. The place had to be stocked full of grey wool coats with leather-patched sleeves in all sizes. There were probably cases of back up leather patches for emergencies. He never knew what the patches were for anyway. He had personally owned several coats over his years and never once had an elbow blow out on any of the sleeves.

Professor Hamlin lowered his glasses down onto the very tip of his pointy, sarcastic nose and asked, “What is it this time, Mr. Kinnet? Car troubles? Family troubles? Personal troubles?”

“Clock troubles?” added someone in the front row.

Alex ignored Professor Hamlin’s stabs today just like he had on every other day he had shown up late to this class. Alex had never given an excuse for why he was late, but Professor Hamlin always acted as if Alex walked in every time with a long-winded

story about a cat in a tree or an elderly lady at a crosswalk. Alex simply sat there and waited for Professor Hamlin's little game to pass.

"No story today, Mr. Kinnet?" Professor Hamlin sneered as he gazed over the top of his arrogantly lowered glasses. "Very well then. Class, Mr. Kinnet has given us all permission to begin today," he smirked as he rejoiced in his little personal victory over the tardiness in the world.

"If everyone would please turn with me to page 319."

Alex immediately regretted getting out of his warm bed every time he heard Professor Hamlin's voice, especially when that voice was discussing the rise and fall of the stock market and mutual funds. Economics wasn't Alex's favorite subject.

Alex had already given up and decided to submit to his professor's will when he realized that he left his Economics book in his room. In the rush to get to class on time Alex had managed to stuff every book he owned into his bag except the one he actually needed. The thought of walking right back out of the door he had just so poorly snuck through was very tempting, but he decided to tough it out. The truth was that Alex knew Professor Hamlin had every right to be hard on him for being late so often. Staying around for the remainder of the lecture was the least he could do. Being a teacher had to be a tough job, and he knew it didn't help when lazy students came to class late every single day.

"Psst, hey there," whispered a girl leaning back in her chair two seats down the row.

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The seat between them was filled with a rather large man with a rather large shirt and matching rather large sweat-stains under each rather large underarm.

Alex leaned back in his chair, attempting to avoid any contact with the sweaty mountain between them. "What's up?"

"Can I borrow some paper? I'm all out," the girl said while leaning behind the sweaty heap of a man between them. "Sleeping beauty isn't responding," she said as she smiled and pointed at deodorant's arch-nemesis.

"Sure," he said, handing her some paper he had taken from his suddenly useless bag. "I won't be needing any of it."

"Yeah, I figured," she said. "I never see you taking any notes in this class."

Alex smiled and shrugged his shoulders, fairly lost for what to say as he turned to face the front of the class. He definitely didn't take many notes in this class, or any other class to be exact. Note taking wasn't exactly a habit for Alex. He had a hard time staying awake through the entire class without the added workload of actually paying attention enough to write something down. However, his understanding of the reasons behind his less than stellar note taking habits would have to wait. He had to address the "new girl two seats down" situation immediately. Luckily enough, he was in the perfect place for deep thought... a classroom with a boring professor.

To say that Alex wasn't a ladies' man would be taking it easy on him. He didn't really care about it. He didn't sit alone in his dorm room wondering when the woman of his dreams would finally walk into his life, but the thought had crossed his mind. He had seen enough movies to know fully well how this "girl of your dreams" would show herself. It was obvious that he was in the perfect place for this type of situation to occur. He lived in a dorm room on a college campus with a very healthy female-to-male ratio walking its grounds. His chances of running into someone were better here at school than at just about anywhere he could imagine. Plus, all of his movie research had shown just how many romances started in classrooms, lab rooms, school functions, cafeterias, and so on. He was bound to run across someone at some point, and every little instance like this one set his mind in motion.

Could this be her? He thought to himself as he allowed his eyes to drift slowly back in her direction. *Should I say something else?*

Alex struggled with his situation for another ten minutes or so before finally deciding he would revisit this argument if the mysterious girl just over the sweaty mountain chose to speak to him again. He would leave the ball in her court.

Having temporarily given up on discovering the mystery girl's true intentions, Alex searched the room for something on which to focus his attention. He needed something to distract him from the endless noise coming from Professor Hamlin's obnoxious mouth.

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Several students closer to the front of the room seemed to be completely enthralled in Professor Hamlin's lecture, but the attentiveness of the classroom began to slip as you stepped back past each row from the front. By the time you made it to the row at the very back of the room you could barely see any eyes that were even open, much less actually paying attention. Alex knew why he always sat in the back row. These were his people. He was a back-row warrior. He would find a seat in the farthest corner of any classroom and avoid eye contact with most any teacher. There are those people who want to sit up front because they want to make sure that they don't miss a single thing. They want nothing to distract them from learning. Back-row warriors were on a mission to do no more than the bare minimum in any class. They were a proud people, simple, and strong. He finally let the ways of his people settle over him and found himself drifting back into the sleep he had so longed for before Fax's rude awakening.

A large tree stood alone in a field of rather nicely trimmed grass. Alex was wondering just how much maintenance was required to keep such pristine field conditions like this when he noticed a girl standing beside the tree. The setting sun behind the girl outlined her body with a warm orange glow. The breeze was blowing just enough to casually toss her hair lightly in the air. He figured he was either in a sappy romantic movie or a shampoo commercial. By this time he had realized he was in his own dream and was trying to take in his surroundings before approaching the young lady in the distance. Everything seemed to be in order, so Alex proceeded towards the lone tree to find out who his mysterious guest was today.

Whom do we have here? He slowly strolled towards the girl.
Hello there, mystery lady.

The girl standing by the tree was as close of a replica of the girl two seats down from him in his Economics class as his brain could compose on such short notice. Alex never prided himself on being one of those people who could remember someone's name forever after just one meeting. He was even worse with faces. He knew that she had a face, but that was about all he could muster.

The girl by the tree was pretty, actually prettier than the mystery girl in his Economics class. This was the impressive thing about his dreams. Alex's mind compensated for any missing material in the makeup of a girl by simply filling in all the blanks with very attractive pieces. For instance, he had no idea what color the mystery girl's eyes had been. No problem. His mind simply made them blue because his mind knew that he liked blue eyes and moved on. He also had no idea what color her hair had been, so his mind made it a beautiful dark brown and shoulder length, and moved on. He couldn't even remember what the girl was wearing, so his mind just put her in a t-shirt and some ripped-up jeans. There is nothing hotter than a girl in a t-shirt and ripped-up jeans and his mind knew it, made it happen, and moved on.

Sometimes Alex's mind got so carried away with altering the imaginary girls' traits in his dreams that they rarely resembled the girls it originally tried to base them on. It didn't matter to Alex. He just went ahead and made his move to kiss the dream girl anyway when...

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“Whack!”

Alex’s head had just slipped out of his hand and hit against the top of his desk. Luckily enough, the entire classroom had just stood up to leave when this happened and no one appeared to have noticed. He checked his chin for drool and started to grab his things when he looked over to where the mystery girl was sitting. She looked up at him at the same time and their eyes met. She smiled at him and he smiled back at her.

She was a lot better looking in my dream. He grabbed his bag and stood up to leave. *I think my mind has set the bar a little too high for my own good.*

Alex walked back out of the classroom door and wandered into the middle of the grassy area just outside before his next class. Realizing he just raced across campus only to be made fun of by his professor and ultimately take a nap, he wondered if Fax’s mission had really been such a bad idea.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning was much like the previous, without the visit from Fax. The morning sun had managed to find its way through the lone window in Alex's room and directly onto his face. He was awake, but still lying there thinking about his dream from the night before.

The woman by the pool in his dream was no one he could recognize. At best, he assumed she was a bad interpretation by his mind of what he wanted to see. He wasn't complaining, he had a good time. He just wasn't sure what could be gained from interpreting this dream, so he let it go.

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Alex tried to adjust to escape the light from the shade-less window that seemed to follow him no matter which way he turned in his bed. He pried open one eye and squinted at the clock across the room. It was only 8:30 am. He would have plenty of time to make it to his 9:30 Intro to Business class. He slowly crawled from under his covers and stood up to begin getting ready to head out into the world.

I'm early today. This may justify a shower. He grabbed his things and began his morning rituals without any fanfare.

Alex, now freshly cleaned and proper, selected a classy ensemble to wear to his classes today; casual jeans and polo. He stood in front of his floor-length mirror that hung on the back of his closet door and gazed at himself with a confident, somewhat sarcastic smile.

"Ladies, ladies, ladies... I am but one man. Please, form a line. There is plenty of Alex Kinnet to go around."

He smiled and shut the door to his closet. He gathered his wallet, keys, cell phone, and some spare change and stuffed his history book into his bag. He was ready to head out, and he still had fifteen minutes to spare.

The hallway of the third floor of the Haile University Building was unusually busy for a Thursday morning. Alex had to squeeze into the elevator with all of the other residents heading out to their 9:30 classes. Most often, the smell of an elevator packed full of college students is not something one might enjoy, but Alex couldn't help but notice the rather pleasant aroma

within the elevator as the passengers made their way down to the lobby.

Afternoon elevator rides smelled of sweat and day-old clothes. This morning's ride smelled of perfumes and hair-care products. Alex would have sworn that he smelled lilac in the air as the doors opened for them to exit into the lobby, even though he wasn't quite sure if he actually knew how lilac smelled.

Alex took his time as he walked across campus to his class. He actually enjoyed his Intro to Business class and particularly liked his professor, Dr. Archer.

Dr. Rose Archer was a very likable woman, and an excellent professor. She had a passion that bordered on compulsion, but it only made her that much more interesting. Some could have easily breezed through a simple Intro to Business course and claimed it was below their teaching level, but not her. Dr. Archer would never do anything to denounce the necessity of learning all that was possible about business and the intricate world within it. Her classes were challenging, but not too hard. Her assignments could be lengthy, but never unreasonable. The best thing about Dr. Archer was how she treated all of her students like human beings.

A lot of the professors at Haile University looked down on the students as if they didn't deserve to be there. It made no sense at all for them to do so; the requirements to get into Haile were no different than any other school. Some professors just didn't communicate well with people younger than they were and this made every interaction with a student overly difficult and unnecessarily intense.

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Alex walked into the Edward J. Aberthanian School of Business building and made his way upstairs to his Intro to Business class. No one really knew who Edward J. Aberthanian was, but everyone in the building agreed that he must have donated quite a bit of money for the school to justify writing his entire name on the side of the nicest building on campus. The building was state of the art from top to bottom. The lobby was decorated like a very nice hotel, complete with a fountain and a small garden in the center. It seemed like a little much for a college campus, but it created a very pleasant environment. Stairs wrapped the outer walls of the lobby and looped in half circles as they extended up to the second and third floors. There were a total of four elevators throughout the building providing access to the upper floors for those in need, but they were mostly used by lazy asses that would wait five minutes for the next elevator in an attempt to avoid a flight of stairs at all costs. Alex never took the elevators in this building. They were always too crowded. Also, he knew he would be in his Business class for an hour and fifteen minutes and wanted to stretch out his legs a little before he had to sit for such a long time.

Alex walked up one flight of stairs and stepped onto the second floor. He made his way to the end of the hall and to the right, and walked into his classroom. Dr. Archer was already writing some quick notes on the dry-erase board before everyone had settled in to begin class.

“Good morning, Alex,” she said with a smile as he walked in the room. “You’re early today.”

“Yep, you know me. Always prompt.” He replied with a smile.

He took a seat near the back of the room. *I guess I’m that guy. I’m the late guy, and everyone knows it.*

Dr. Archer checked her watch and turned to face the class. “Let’s go ahead and get started,” she said as she turned on the overhead projector hanging from the center of the room. All of the classes in the Edward J. Aberthanian School of Business building had projectors hanging from the centers of the rooms. Rows of seats were arranged in a stadium-style setup, each row a step higher as you moved away from the front of the room. This building was state of the art.

Alex had almost forgotten the importance of today’s class. Dr. Archer had announced on Tuesday that the end of the semester assignment would be given out today. Alex was happy he actually managed to make it to class on time for once.

Dr. Archer faced the class with a smile at precisely 9:30. She was wasting no time in cutting right to the point of the matter.

“As you all know, the end of the semester is four weeks away. The assignment I am about to give you will be worth sixty percent of your overall grade for this class.”

The entire class moaned simultaneously at the sound of this announcement. Everyone knew it was coming, but it hurt just the same. The next four weeks were going to be filled with exams and projects galore. This was just the icing on Haile University’s cake of pain and torture.

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“The purpose of this class is to prepare you for the business world ahead of you. Since I am certain all of you will be searching for some type of employment upon graduation in a few years, this assignment will help you in your quest for what occupation best suits you.”

Dr. Archer moved behind her desk in the front of the room and brought up a document on the projector screen just to her right. “Choosing a Career” was written in huge letters at the top of the page, followed closely by rows of specifics about the assignment itself. Alex read along on the screen as Dr. Archer read the assignment aloud.

“You will each choose a career you are interested in pursuing upon graduation. You will need to do a five page explanation of why you chose that career, along with a presentation of the pros and cons associated with the career you have chosen. You will each have seven minutes to present your chosen career and give your presentation before the rest of your peers on the last Thursday of the semester, just before the Christmas break.”

Again, the class let out a simultaneous moan and everyone began chattering about how this assignment was the end of their collective lives as they knew it.

“I urge you all to start on this as soon as you can. It may take longer to complete than you are expecting,” Dr. Archer said as she glanced directly at the back row and its proud warriors.

“I know we have our fair share of procrastinators in this classroom. This assignment will not be easy to cram into a few hours in the library.”

The dread had already begun to set in over the entire classroom when Dr. Archer changed the subject.

“With that out of the way,” she calmly stated as she opened up a power point slide on the screen to her right, “we can now get back to where we left off in Tuesday’s session.”

The entire class took out notebooks and began the tedious job of taking notes. Notes were everything in college. A good set of notes from class was worth more than a pile of books stacked to the ceiling. Professors gave their tests from information presented in their notes. Everyone knew it, but still bought the books. It was a scam, but everyone bought the books just the same.

Dr. Archer cleared her throat and innocently started in on the day’s topic as if she hadn’t just dropped an end of the semester bombshell on a class full of terrified students.

“The importance of specialization in the American business work dynamic has increased immensely over the last hundred years...”

Alex made little attempt to take notes. He was far too distracted with the thought of choosing a career for his presentation to take notes. He thought of a few easy ones immediately. His older brother, Avery, was a very successful Real Estate Agent and would be more than happy to volunteer any information that would help Alex in his presentation. Also, Fax’s dad was an investment broker for a local firm and Alex knew he would be an excellent source for graphs and charts and

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lots of other filler for his Power Point slide. Dr. Archer's lecture lasted the remainder of their session. Everyone looked tired from taking notes for over an hour, and the class emptied at 10:45 with hardly a word spoken. One more class left for the day. At least he would get to fight through this one with his best friend, Dale.

CHAPTER FOUR

A lot can be learned in an hour and fifteen minute History class. However, it is very hard to learn anything while you are asleep in the back row. Alex and Dale both woke up just as the classroom was emptying.

“Dale, do you believe that dreams mean anything?” Alex asked as they entered the courtyard again on their way back to their dorms. Alex wasn’t really sure of the response he would get from Dale. Dale was a smart guy, and he was usually serious about things. Alex didn’t know if Dale would get very deep into a conversation about dreams and interpreting them.

“Well, I don’t know if I have ever honestly given it much

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thought.” Dale responded, much to Alex’s surprise. “I suppose they have to mean something, right?”

Dale’s response wasn’t the most riveting argument for or against dreams having meaning, but it was something. He figured it was worth a shot.

“My dreams are weird,” Alex said as they continued through the courtyard. “I’m not sure what to take from mine. They are usually about women, women that I have actually met in real life.”

Alex had apparently piqued Dale’s interest with this last remark. Dale stopped in his tracks and turned to face Alex.

“Dude, those are fantasies. I don’t think those are the same as dreams.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked with a surprised look on his face.

“I mean that everyone has fantasies, man. That’s just part of being a guy. Everybody has a daydream about some hot girl along the way. I don’t think you can take much from that.” Dale explained as they stood in the courtyard with people passing on both sides. “If you want to analyze a dream, you need to have a real dream first. I don’t think you can take much from a daydream about some hot girl. Take mine for example. During History class just now, I was getting out of the cockpit of my fighter jet to the cheering of an aircraft carrier full of people celebrating my victory. That’s more like a normal dream. I think you could take something away from that, you know?”

Alex attempted to take in everything Dale was saying. It seemed to make sense, except for the fact that he didn't really have a lot of "normal" dreams as far as Dale was concerned. Dale's dream seemed to have a meaning, or at least a theme. Dale was a hero in his dream.

"So, what does that make me then?" Alex asked as he looked back at Dale for advice. "If all I dream about is a random girl here and there, what does that make me?"

Dale took a moment and stared back at Alex before giving his response. "Well... I guess that makes you a big pervert." Dale said with a huge smile on his face. "Sorry, buddy. There's just no way around it."

Alex couldn't help but smile. He knew he would have said the same thing if the situation had been reversed.

"They have to mean more than that," he said as he started walking towards the H.U.B. again. "I already knew that. I thought dreams were supposed to be telling me something I didn't already know," he smiled as the two continued on their way back to their dorms.

Alex wanted to discuss in full detail just what happened in his dreams, but he wasn't sure if Dale would understand. Having the ability to explore your dreams is one thing. Explaining that ability to someone else without having that person think you are crazy is another.

Dale and Alex made their way back through the lobby and up

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to their rooms. Dale turned to Alex just before he walked into his dorm.

“Hey, are we still going to the Brick House tonight?”

Alex had forgotten all about going, but definitely still wanted to go.

“Sure,” he said as casually as possible in an attempt to hide his forgetfulness. “Of course we are.”

Dale looked back at Alex and shook his head as he unlocked his door and began to walk inside.

“You forgot. I knew it. I’ll see you around 6:00. Try not to forget that, too,” he said as he closed the door behind him.

Normally, Alex would have a comeback to defend his slip up and call out Dale, but nothing really came to mind today.

“Yeah, six is good for me. Thanks for asking,” he said as he stared at Dale’s closed door.

I wonder when we decided to go to the Brick House. He tried to remember making the plans as he put down his bag and took off his watch. It’s fine by me, but I really don’t remember talking about it at all.

Alex continued to put away his things and tidy up his room a little before he settled in for a few hours. There wasn’t much else for him to do until 6:00, so he killed what little time he could by attempting to clean. He eventually gave up and watched

some TV. *Maybe I should get a job.*

The TV was visible from this angle, but Alex wasn't even paying attention to it at this point. His head was already on his pillow and his mind was beginning to wander. His mind began exploring the possibilities of having a job and a car.

A car never seems like a big deal until you don't have one. I would need a job to get a car, though. I could get a job at a coffee shop. I actually like coffee, too. I might be the model employee. I could be a barista and serve little cups of sunshine to people as they try to make it through their days.

Alex's mind explored the endless possibilities a job could provide as he lay on his bed. He even started to think back to the assignment about the career he was supposed to choose for Business class. His mind was racing as an episode of the original Star Trek series started up on his television. Alex wasn't a fan. His mind immediately switched into high gear and began to shuffle through the age-old debate (at least as far as he was concerned) about which Star Trek Captain was the best. He struggled to stay awake for a solid three minutes before he fell asleep.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Alex awoke to the buzzing of his cell phone on the table beside his bed. It took him several groggy seconds to figure out what was going on, but he finally managed to grab the phone and flip it open. “1 New Message” was brightly displayed in the middle of his cell phone screen. Alex hit “Read” and noticed that Dale had sent him a message. “Wake up, you loser. We’re leaving in 10 minutes,” flashed across the screen. Alex shook his head a few times to try and wake up enough to get up and move around. He tried to think back to his dreams from his nap... nothing. *No dreams today, and that’s just fine by me.*

Not remembering his dreams meant he wouldn’t have to spend the following hours trying to figure out what they meant,

and Alex had been a little worried about what his mind could make happen after hearing Dale's story about climbing from a fighter jet onto an aircraft carrier. *I think that one is best left alone.*

He picked out his classiest dark blue polo and put it on. "Only the best for the Brick House," he said as he looked into his mirror and laughed, quite sure no one had ever referred to any of his clothes as "the best" of anything at all.

Alex, now dressed to kill, grabbed all his normal necessities and made his way out into the hallway of the third floor. He locked his dorm room door and turned to knock on Dale's. Dale answered Alex's second knock with a loud "Come on in, it's open." Alex walked inside Casa de Dale.

"I honestly didn't think you were going to get up," Dale said as he gathered up some loose change and put it in his pocket. "How long have you been asleep?"

Alex thought for a moment about just how long he had been asleep. "I'm not entirely sure," he responded with a genuine confused look on his face. "I cleaned up a little and watched some TV before I fell asleep. It must have been several hours."

For Alex, the most amazing part about his extended nap wasn't the amount of time involved, but more so the fact that he had no memory of any dreams within that nap.

Odd, I would have expected a trilogy of fantastic dreams over several hours of sleep.

Alex looked around Dale's room as he waited to leave for the

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Brick House. Dale's room was very, very Dale. There were bowling trophies and awards that Dale had won over the years on several shelves. He really was a great bowler, but that wasn't the most intriguing part to Alex. Alex wasn't as concerned with the awards as he was with the dedication and determination involved with obtaining those awards. Some people would look down on a room filled with bowling trophies, but not Alex. This wasn't just because he was Dale's friend, either. Alex never had any type of affiliation with any club or sporting event that ever gave an award of any kind. He never really attempted to participate in anything of that nature. He always wondered what it would be like to get a trophy for something. The opportunity never really presented itself, and by no means had Alex ever went out searching for such an opportunity. He wasn't depressed by missing out on this part of life. He was actually extremely interested. He looked around Dale's room several times, taking in everything he could as Dale was gathering his things.

"You have a gift, man," Dale said as he walked toward the door, apparently ready to leave. "I don't know of anyone who sleeps as much as you."

Alex had been distracted by his examination of Dale's room, but was fairly certain that Dale's comment about being gifted was sarcasm. He returned a "Thank you very much" just to be safe. Dale simply shook his head as they walked out into the hallway. Dale locked his door behind them and they made their way to the elevator.

Dale and Alex walked through an empty lobby and got into Dale's car. The Brick House wasn't very far from campus and

they made it there in record time. The Brick House was one of the best places to hang out around Haile University. It may very well have been the best place for coffee in all of Northfield. The café was given its name for obvious reasons... it looked like a little brick house. It was simple enough, and it worked well for advertising purposes. Little brick houses were ideal for providing perfect coffee environments and all of the cardboard heat-sleeves on the paper cups had a brick pattern with "Brick House Café" across the middle. The place was great for relaxing and having a cup of coffee.

"What would we do without this place?" Dale asked as he pulled into a parking space just outside the front doors of the building.

Alex closed his eyes just for a few seconds as he walked inside the Brick House. He did this every time and loved every second of it. As he closed his eyes he could feel the warmth of the coffee pouring over him just as the aroma of the fresh brew hit his nose. *It's the little things in life.*

"It feels like home in here," Dale said as he walked over to an empty table and sat down. Alex followed right behind him and took a seat just across from him. A waitress quickly walked up to their table to take their orders.

"Hey guys," a cute little brunette said as she whipped out her pen and pad. "What are we having tonight?"

Dale and Alex were both frequent customers and made their requests without the need of a menu.

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"I'll have a medium mocha latte with no whip cream and a blueberry scone," Dale replied.

"And I'll have a marble mocha macchiato with skim milk," Alex added as he looked up at the waitress and smiled.

"Sounds like a plan, boys. I'll have them right out," she said as she turned and headed back towards the counter.

The Brick House was one of a kind. It was primarily a coffee bar, but the owner ran the place like a diner. Most coffee bars had you order your drink at the counter and sit down if you wanted afterwards. The Brick House had a wide selection of sandwiches and pastries to go along with their impressive menu of coffees, and they were always more than happy to serve you any of it from the comfort of whichever table you chose.

"Who's the new girl?" Dale asked as he watched their waitress walking back to the kitchen. "I don't think I've seen her around before."

"No idea," Alex responded. "I think I would have remembered her."

"Definitely," Dale added as the new girl reappeared from the kitchen carrying a plate with Dale's blueberry scone.

"Here ya go," she said as she sat the plate down in front of Dale. "Your coffees will be ready in just a minute or so."

"Thanks," they both said as the new girl turned and walked away again.

She reappeared just a little over a minute later, carrying two steaming hot cups of coffee, just as ordered. Alex and Dale each smiled as they took their first sips of their drinks.

“Perfect,” Alex said as he sat his cup down on the table.

“Amen, brutha,” Dale replied as he too sat down his cup. “They never cease to amaze me.”

Alex and Dale paused their celebration of “all things coffee-related” as they noticed the owner, Tom, walking towards their table.

“Hey guys, how are things?” Tom said as he pulled out a chair and sat with them at their table.

“Wonderful now,” Alex said as he held up his coffee cup and smiled.

Tom simply laughed and turned to Dale, who was now halfway through his blueberry scone. “How’s that scone, Dale?”

Dale, with scone in hand and crumbs falling from his mouth, managed to mutter what was most likely “fantastic” as he struggled to speak without spitting out his food.

Tom laughed again and stood up. He pushed in his chair and slapped Alex on the back as he said, “You guys let me know if you need anything else, okay?”

“No problem, Tom,” Alex said as Tom turned to walk back

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into the kitchen.

Dale, who had finally managed to swallow enough of his scone to speak again, motioned for Tom to come back to their table for a second. "Hold on, hold on," he said as he waved for Tom to come back. "Who's the new girl," he said with a huge smile on his face. "She's cute."

Tom reached down and slapped Dale on the back as he laughed again. "You guys like the new girl, huh?"

Alex was a little embarrassed by the boldness of Dale's move, but found himself intrigued about the new girl as well.

"She's cute, Tom. What's her name?" Dale asked as he took another drink from his cup.

Alex found himself focused on Tom's every word. Apparently, he was much more interested in this new girl than he had initially thought.

"She just started here yesterday. She's really sweet and picked up on everything really quickly," Tom said as he pointed to the new girl ringing up some customers at their diner-style register on the front counter. "Her name is Ivy."

Alex couldn't help but notice an odd sensation that came over him as Tom said her name. *Ivy. That's a pretty name.*

Alex and Dale hung out at their table for over an hour talking about random topics before they decided to pack it up and go back to the dorms. They took their checks up to the counter,

gave Ivy their money, and waved goodbye to Tom as they walked out into the parking lot.

“Tom is a good guy,” Dale said as he pulled out his keys to unlock his door. “He has to know everyone in this town by now.”

“You’re probably right,” Alex replied. Tom really was a great person and Alex enjoyed talking with him from time to time. Tom gave some great advice. He was one of those rare types that actually meant every word he said. He genuinely cared about people, and he loved to talk to them as they came in and out of his café.

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CHAPTER SIX

The ride home from the Brick House was just as eventful as could be expected. The night was over and Alex was completely satisfied with the idea of falling asleep on his bed as soon as he walked into his room.

“I need something to drink,” Dale said as he pulled into a gas station a mere two miles from the Brick House.

“Are you serious,” Alex replied with a truly puzzled look on his face. “We just left the Brick House, where we both sat and drank coffee for hours and you’re thirsty?”

Dale ignored Alex’s facial expressions and merely responded

with, "You know that I get that weird taste in my mouth after too much coffee. I need something carbonated."

Alex already knew why Dale wanted to stop at this particular gas station. Dale came up with many different excuses for stopping here on several different occasions. There was a special certain someone who worked behind the counter at this gas station and a special certain Dale had a crush on her.

"Don't even start talking trash, either. I promise. I am really thirsty, that's all," Dale stated in his own defense. He already knew the onslaught of jokes was on its way about the girl behind the counter, but he fought it as best he could.

"Whatever, man." Alex laughed as Dale parked his car just outside the front door and turned off the engine. "The truth shall set you free."

Dale and Alex stepped out of the car and stared at each other across its roof.

"The truth shall set me free? Really?" Dale asked as he shook his head at Alex in disappointment. "That doesn't exactly apply here."

Alex just laughed and made his way to the front of the station. "It doesn't have to apply to anything, that's why it's funny, you dork. Geez."

A bell rang as the two opened the front door to the gas station. Dale walked directly to the soft drink section without as much as a glance in the direction of the counter. Alex, however,

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switched back and forth continuously between Dale and the girl at the counter.

“Come on, Dale. Just talk to her. She works at a gas station, man. I don’t think you are the worst thing to walk in here and flirt with her.” Alex attempted to say in his most supportive tone. “Just give it a shot.”

“Not the worst thing,” Dale smirked as he stopped in front of the row of refrigerators that housed every possible beverage selection available. “I’d say just stop right now on that motivational speaking career you’ve been working on.”

Alex stood next to Dale as the two perused the many choices in soft drinks before their eyes. “I know you like her. Hell, *she* probably knows it by now. We’re in here a lot, Dale.”

Dale opened up the door just to his left and pulled out a nice cold twenty ounce bottle of Diet Dr. Pepper. “This stuff is actually made from happiness and joy, with a dash of awesome, did you know that, Alex?”

“Really, that’s the road we are going to take tonight, huh? You are just going to ignore what I’m saying. Nice. Very productive,” Alex added as he also took a Diet Dr. Pepper from the fridge to Dale’s left. “Just talk to her.”

“Just talk to her, huh?” Dale asked as he closed the refrigerator door and turned to face Alex. “Just talk to her, like all of the girls you just talk to?”

Alex tried to find a way to snap back at Dale and prove him

wrong, but it didn't take long for Alex to realize that Dale was right. He had nothing to say as he looked back at Dale, who was awaiting a response.

"Exactly," Dale proclaimed as he took his drink and made his way to the counter near the front doors.

The girl behind the counter was very cute. Alex also insisted that once you factored in that she worked at a gas station you could more than double her hotness. Cute girls didn't work at gas stations. It wasn't a law or anything, just the way of the world. So, by Alex's logic, since she worked at a gas station, it would only be fair to compare her to other gas station employees. Alex smiled and laughed to himself as he pondered the rating system he had come up with in his mind as he waited behind Dale at the counter. He would have stood there for another ten minutes if he hadn't been awoken from his daze by the bell at the front door as Dale walked out to his car.

"Just the drink for me," Alex said as he placed his bottle on the counter for the girl to ring up.

The girl swiped the drink with her scanner and told Alex that it would be one dollar and twenty three cents. Alex began to rummage through his pockets for some change as he heard Dale starting up his car in the parking lot.

"I think your friend is going to leave you," the girl said as she nodded in the direction of Dale's car backing out of the spot by the front door.

"Yeah, he's just the greatest," Alex stated as he made the most

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sarcastic face he could muster on such short notice. He looked and looked for some change in his pockets as Dale continued his best impression of someone leaving his friend at a gas station. "Screw it, here's two bucks. Keep the change."

Alex put two dollar bills on the counter and hurried outside to Dale's car. "Hahaha!" Alex shouted as he pulled open the passenger door and got in. "You are just the funniest person ever."

Dale said nothing the rest of the way home, but wore a grin for the first few minutes. He was quite proud of his little stunt, especially since he knew that he really was about to pull away and leave Alex at the gas station the whole time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex awoke on Friday morning feeling quite refreshed. He vaguely remembered his dreams from the night before. There were a few images of a girl behind a counter of some kind, but he wasn't sure if it was the girl from the gas station and he definitely didn't care. Fridays weren't as exciting for Alex as they were for most people. He would have his Economics class for the third time this week, another attempt at going to his Algebra 2 class, and then... well... nothing at all. He had no huge plans for the weekend. This was fairly normal. Either way, the biggest obstacle in Alex's world was getting up in time to make it to Economics by 11:30. It was a never-ending battle between his bed and his mind. The bed had a very nice winning streak going at this point.

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Alex stared up at the ceiling from his bed. *If I get up right now I might actually make it to my class on time today. I sure would hate to deny Professor Hamlin his morning jokes, though.*

Alex finally made his way out of his bed and began getting ready for his classes. It wasn't exactly an extensive procedure, but he got up to begin it either way.

"Ahh, a classic ensemble, Mr. Kinnet." Alex remarked to himself as he held up the current selection of shirt and jeans. He was dressed in no time at all and ready to go out and face his day. He even remembered to put his Economics book in his bag this time.

Wow, leaving on time and I actually have everything I need for my classes. Maybe Fridays actually are better than the rest of the week. He locked his dorm room door and proceeded down the hallway to the elevator.

Professor Hamlin walked to the front of the room and turned to face his audience. He quickly scanned the seats in front of him and made his way to the back row where Alex was sitting. Professor Hamlin then looked directly at Alex, then down at his watch (now held up to his face in an overly dramatic way so that the entire class would understand that he was looking at the time), and back to Alex.

"Oh great," Alex said under his breath to his fellow warriors in the back of the room. "Here he goes."

“Mr. Kinnet, are you feeling well today?” Professor Hamlin asked as he turned to walk back to his desk in the front of the room. “I don’t know if you are aware of this, but you actually made it to class *on time* today.”

The classroom quietly laughed together as Professor Hamlin turned back around to face his audience. He was quite pleased with his own joke.

Alex contemplated standing up and taking a bow in front of the entire class just to show up Professor Hamlin and steal his thunder, but he decided to just take his blows and fight this fight on another day. He merely smiled a small “kiss my ass” smile and got his book out of his bag. *What kind of a jerk makes fun of someone for being on time?*

Alex shook his head as he pulled his Economics book from his bag. *I guess the same kind of jerk that wears coats with patches on the sleeves.*

He attempted to mentally prepare himself for sitting through another lecture as he stared up at Professor Hamlin who was already deeply invested in his own little economic sermon about the state of the economy as we know it.

Alex was in no real hurry to take any notes, so he started to scan the room for the girl with whom he spoke on Wednesday. She was only one row down, but four or five seats to his right. *This is worse than the big sweaty guy between us.*

This distance will not help me in my current situation. He sighed as he watched the girl begin to actually pay attention to the

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lecture he was so easily ignoring. *What a shame. I had such high hopes for that one.*

Alex's day was officially over as Professor Hamlin dismissed the class. There were other classes to attend, but it was Friday and Alex was barely in the mood. Make no mistake, he had nothing at all planned that was distracting him from school, but he was eager to be done with it nonetheless.

"What to do now?," he mumbled to himself as he walked away from the dungeon that housed his Economics classroom. *How can I never have any plans on Friday nights?*

Just as Alex began to ponder his choices for the evening he felt a small vibration in his pocket. He smiled as he thought about the joke he would have made if anyone had been around to hear it as he pulled out his phone and answered it. "Hello," he said as he kept walking back towards his dorm.

"What's up, buddy?" Dale said from the other end on the line. "Just letting you know that we have practice tonight and I'll be done around seven."

Alex took a few seconds to translate Dale's sentence into something he could comprehend. The "we" he mentioned was Dale's bowling team and "done around seven" was Dale's way of saying "What are you doing around seven tonight?"

"Sounds good to me, man. Just let me know when you get done and we can get coffee or something." Alex just waited on the phone for the question he knew was about to be asked.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come watch us practice? It’ll be fun!” Dale said as he did on every phone call right before he went to bowling practice. Alex drifted off into wondering why a team of bowlers had to get together to practice, anyway, since they didn’t even bowl at the same time. *They could just as easily bowl on their own schedules for practice with the same results.*

Alex had completely lost track of his own phone conversation when Dale spoke up with a loud “DUDE! Wake up!” Alex was so startled that he almost dropped his phone he had forgotten he was using.

“What?! Geez! I’m here.”

Dale laughed and asked again, like he always did, “You coming?”

Alex always said “No.” He just did, always. Something about this time was different, though. He never wanted to go, but he never really had a reason not to want to go. Alex could recall several times in which he had actually thought about going, but still, he had never gone to see Dale’s bowling practice.

He was just about to announce his all too familiar “No” when a thought crossed his mind. *What the hell else do I have to do tonight? And, Dale has asked me to go for ages and I have never been, why not?*

Dale chimed in again with another “Dude, you there?” just as Alex responded with, “Sure, what time?”

Dale had already started in on his traditional “Well, maybe

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next time” speech when he realized that Alex had said “Yes.”

“Hold on, did you say that you are going?” Dale’s shock was very obvious in his tone. “We start at five. What time are you done with your classes today? I can pick you up.”

Alex explained how his class schedule for today had been changed due to lack of participation from... well... Alex Kinnet. Dale wasn’t exactly the spokesperson for perfect attendance, so there was no fanfare in Alex’s dismissal of his classes on a Friday.

Alex went back to his dorm to hang out before Dale picked him up. *Wow, I am one wild and crazy guy, trying to fit a night of someone else’s bowling practice and coffee into one evening.* He put up his books and watched a few hours of television to top off his action-packed afternoon.

Some people might say that attending an official bowling league practice session is enough to call it a day, but no, not you Alex. You are going to follow up sitting at that practice session by sitting at a coffee shop. Alex continued to think to himself about how “cool” his evening would be as he cleaned up a few things around the room before he left for the evening.

Dale came back to the dorms around 4:00 to pick up Alex, and they headed out to get something to eat before they went to the bowling alley. Alex was fine with eating at the alley, but Dale didn’t like to eat so close to his competition. They got a few burgers and some drinks from a Burger King near campus and wasted a little time before they went to practice.

Walking into the bowling alley was no big deal for Alex, and he didn't expect it to be. It was just a bowling alley to him. Dale was different. Dale stepped through the doors of the bowling alley as if crowds were standing around him just waiting for a chance at an autograph. He never just strolled into the bowling alley. He marched like a king entering his castle. Dale stepped through the front doors and immediately starting waving to people and shaking hands with all of his bowling friends. He was a celebrity here. Alex couldn't help but feel a little sad during Dale's grand entrance. He knew there was nowhere he could walk into and be greeted like Dale had been greeted here. Dale was important here. He belonged to something. Alex was happy for Dale, just like any good friend would be, but he was jealous at the same moment. *Dale is a god here.*

Alex took a seat near the rest of Dale's team. *My only audience is Professor Hamlin's class who laughs at me for being late all of the time. Damn.*

Dale finished up his meet and greet and bowled some fine games with the rest of his teammates. Alex finally broke down and got his own lane to give it a shot. He bowled a not-so-impressive 107.

"You're a natural," Dale said as he walked up to Alex who had just finished his set. "I've seen pins shake before, but those... those pins are terrified of you, man."

Alex looked back at Dale and forced the most serious face he could muster. "You're damn right they are, buddy, damn right."

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“You know, they have ways to cover the gutters so that you won’t mess up so much if you want them,” Dale said as they walked up to the counter for Alex to return his shoes. “They are for little kids, but I won’t tell anyone if you...”

“Oh shut up!” Alex said as he cut Dale off in mid-sentence. “Just give me some time and I will *own* you at bowling.”

“Sure thing, man. I’m not going to hold my breath, though, if it’s okay with you,” Dale laughed as they walked to the car. “Oh yeah, I meant to tell you earlier. A buddy of mine’s wife is wanting to sell her pink six-pound ball if you are interested in working your way up.”

“Oh, you should do stand-up, Dale. Seriously, can you see in my face how funny I think you are? Jackass.” Alex mumbled as they got into Dale’s car and headed off to the Brick House for their exciting conclusion to their action-packed Friday.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dale and Alex were at their table in the Brick House in no time. Alex had already ordered their usual rounds of coffee by the time he realized that Ivy was working tonight. Someone else had already taken their order, but she came by to check on them.

“Hey there, guys.” Ivy said as she handed another order to the girl at the check-out counter and walked over to Alex and Dale’s table. “Have you guys already ordered?”

Alex immediately looked over at Dale as if to ask, “Hey, have we ordered yet?”

Dale was looking back at Alex with a very confused

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expression as he answered Ivy with a “Yeah, we’re all set.”

“Sounds great, guys. Enjoy.” Ivy said as she walked back to her area of the diner.

Alex was trying to understand what just happened as Dale got right to the point of it.

“So, you like her, huh?” he posed ever so calmly as they sat at their table awaiting their drinks.

Alex knew they had already ordered, but for some reason just, froze up. He wasn’t about to let Dale call him out like this, though. He actually came up with something right there on the spot, going against everything he had previously thought about his “winging-it” skill set.

“I had something in my throat, man. I didn’t want to cough all over her, so I just tried to give you the signal to tell her we were taken care of.” Alex delivered his lines with as much conviction as he could fake and waited for Dale’s response.

Dale’s expression never changed. “You’re full of it, dude. I’m not an idiot, although that was a fairly impressive story you just made up to cover your little love-sick ass,” he said as a smile began to stretch from ear to ear across his face. “Ahh, young love.”

“Oh shut up, you ass. I don’t even know her. There’s no reason to act like I have a thing for her. I told you that I had something in my throat.” Alex explained as Dale sat there staring right through him.

“Whatever, dude. I just call it like I see it.” Dale added as the waitress who took their order brought over their coffee and scones.

The mood and the topic of conversation quickly changed to the events of the next few weeks and the exams that would follow. Dale had his share of papers to write, and Alex had already explained having to choose a career and the presentation that went with it.

“You know where we’re going to have to go, don’t you?” Dale asked in a very serious tone as he sat his mug on the table.

Alex knew exactly where Dale was talking about. It was a place the two of them had made every attempt to avoid... the library.

The two of them sat there as if they had both been handed death sentences. The thought of having to go to the library multiple times over the next few weeks was horrifying to say the least.

“Do they allow coffee in the library?” Dale asked as a serious expression crept onto his face. “They have to allow coffee in there, man!”

“I’m sure they do, Dale, but how am I supposed to know what I’m going to be when I get out of college?” Alex asked as he pondered a refill of his coffee. “I can barely decide what to wear to class, assuming I actually make it to class.”

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Dale looked up from his empty coffee mug and added, "Hey buddy, you're preaching to the choir here. I have to write three papers and have a presentation for one of them, too."

Alex appreciated the fact that Dale also had a lot of work ahead of him, but knew very well that the tasks at hand would not shake Dale to his core. The thought of having to contemplate a career was just plain overwhelming to Alex.

"You know, you don't have to pick a career you actually plan on pursuing," Dale said as he tried to help his obviously worried friend. "Just pick a career with a lot of handy information and present that. Who cares if you will actually do it? It isn't like they are going to come and check on you after you graduate."

Alex's ears had never before heard such a glorious idea. "Why didn't I think of that?" he asked Dale as he went ahead and ordered a refill on his coffee. "That makes so much sense. It's almost perfect."

Dale popped the last piece of scone left on his plate into his mouth and mumbled through his chewing a very serious, "That's what I do. I am perfection."

Alex laughed as Dale tried to maintain his serious look. He held it for a few more seconds, but that was all. They both sat there laughing as crumbs flew from Dale's mouth.

Alex knew that Dale's solution for the assignment was the simplest, but his mind had already started the process of determining what his career would be after college. He was too late to stop it at this point. Alex couldn't just let things go like

other people. The seed was planted, as they say, and Alex knew that it would grow into a nuisance if he didn't tend to it regularly. Dale started in on another topic, but Alex just nodded as he sat there solely focused on the assignment and the weeks of work ahead of him.

The refills kept coming as they sat there discussing everything and nothing all at once. The owner, Tom, even stopped by for a little bit to check in with his favorite regular customers. Tom always made for good conversation, but Alex's mind still wandered.

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CHAPTER NINE

Two weeks had passed since Dr. Archer assigned the “choose your career” death sentence and Alex had actually made quite a bit of progress on it. He and Dale had developed a nice routine of going to the Brick House for their coffee and taking it with them to the library to work on their respective assignments in the evenings.

“I feel like we live in this place.” Dale said as he plopped another book down on the table in front of him. “How do people do this crap all of the time?”

“I hear ya, man.” Alex responded over his pile of books in front of him. Dale and Alex walked past the library often on

their way to and from their dorms and always saw it overflowing with students. "I just thought you had to come by and check out a book here and there or something casual like that. This... this is like work."

"Amen, brutha. This is way too much like work." Dale added as he cracked the spine on his latest book in order for it to lay flat on the table.

The two of them had made such a habit of coming to the library in the evenings that Fax even found himself in the library alongside them on several occasions. On this particular night, Fax found himself enjoying another one of his "fact-finding missions" involving the cute girl behind the counter.

"Does Fax actually go to Haile University?" Dale asked as he looked up to the counter where the cute girl stood giggling at Fax. "I mean, I think I've seen him in one of the buildings before, but does he go to any classes?"

Alex laughed to himself at first and then abruptly stopped as he began to realize that he had never actually seen a book or a bag or a piece of paper in Fax's hands. "I don't know. I would say that it was impossible if it were anyone but Fax."

"How are your papers coming along?" Alex asked as he turned back towards Dale. "Are you making any progress over there?"

Dale let out a sigh as he looked down on the stacks of papers in front of him. "I'm getting close. You?"

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Alex could have spent twenty minutes giving all of the details of the progress he had made, but gave Dale the condensed version. "Yep."

Alex was actually a lot closer than he expected to be at this point, but at the same time still felt completely lost. He never decided on a career so he put together two full reports and presentations. He only told Dale about the real estate presentation and decided to keep the secondary investment broker presentation to himself. It wasn't that he was afraid he was the only person ever to have done two reports when only assigned to do one. He was positive he was the only one. He knew that it was crazy to work twice as hard as required, but he just plain couldn't decide. *Better safe than sorry*. He sighed as he stuck his nose back in the book in his hands.

Dale and Alex stayed in the library for another hour or so before they decided to call it a night. Fax had apparently left with the girl behind the counter at some point without saying anything to either of them.

"I am fairly certain that Fax enjoys coming here much more than the rest of us," Alex smirked as he and Dale walked out to Dale's car just outside the library's front doors. "I'm sick of this place. I just don't think books are my thing."

"I have to agree with you, sir," Dale responded as he unlocked the doors and got inside. "Let's go get something to eat. I'm hungry."

"Let me check my schedule," Alex said as he flipped through some loose papers in his hands. "Yeah, I think I can make that

happen.”

The two of them drove a few blocks away from campus to a little grocery store where most of the students at Haile bought their food.

“I think I want a bag of chips and some donuts or something.” Dale suggested as he parked his car and turned off the engine. “I’m just feeling like something healthy, ya know?”

Alex responded with a casual, “Always,” and the two of them walked in to buy their snacks.

True to his word, Dale headed right for the chips and the donuts while Alex looked around for something to drink. He had just made his selection of a Diet Dr. Pepper when someone tapped him on his shoulder. Assuming it was just Dale being annoying, he kept looking forward and simply responded with a very cold, “What do you want?”

“Wow, nice to see you, too,” a very soft and un-Dale-ish voice said from behind him. Alex quickly turned around as he started to say, “I’m so sorry, I thought you were Dale.”

“Well, I’ve been called some weird names in my life, but never Dale.” Ivy said as she stood there with her own Diet Dr. Pepper bottle in her hand.

Alex turned a very interesting shade of red as he fumbled his way through apologizing to Ivy for being so rude. “I’m really sorry,” he said, “I thought you were Dale.”

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“Yeah, you already said that,” she said as Dale walked up to the two of them in the aisle.

“Hey there, Ivy. What’s up?” Dale added in his coolest Dale voice.

“I was just grabbing something to drink before I headed home for the night. Just wanted to see if you guys were coming to the movie tomorrow night at the Brick House.”

Alex had forgotten all about the movie they were showing on Friday in the midst of all of his library projects.

“Oh, come on, you guys are in there all of the time. There’s no way you could have missed all the signs,” she added as Alex and Dale simply stood there with matching “We forgot” looks on their faces. “Either way, we are showing ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’ tomorrow night around 7:00 if you guys want to come by. It’s a holiday classic. We are trying to cheer everyone up for the season. The whole campus seems to be bogged down with the pressure of exams and projects and papers and things. So, are you coming?”

Alex had seriously forgotten all about the movie at the Brick House. He also had absolutely zero plans other than working on his Intro to Business project. “Of course we’re coming. We wouldn’t miss it,” he replied.

Alex turned to look at Dale for some sort of a sign of agreement on his decision and found that Dale was barely paying attention at all. “Dale, we are going tomorrow night to the movie, right?”

Dale thought for a moment before answering. "Does that mean we don't have to go to the library tomorrow night?"

"Sure," Alex responded. "We won't have to go to the library tomorrow night if we go to..."

"Yes. We will be attending the movie." Dale added. "I would do anything at this point to not have to go to the library."

"Well, sounds like I'll see you both there, then," Ivy said as she grabbed a bag of Sun Chips to go with her Diet Dr. Pepper and turned to head towards the checkout counter. "Goodnight."

Alex and Dale let out a simultaneous, "Goodnight" as she walked away from them. They both hung around the drinks section of the store for a few more minutes until Ivy had already checked out before they walked up to the counter. They knew well enough to avoid running into someone a few minutes after you had already said "goodnight" or "goodbye" or "nice seeing you again." It was damn near the epitome of awkwardness and best if avoided at all times.

Dale bought his chips, donuts, and chocolate milk and Alex bought his Diet Dr. Pepper and the two of them got into Dale's car. They were almost back to the dorms when Dale finally decided to speak about what just happened.

"So, she totally went all Kirk on you back there, man." Dale explained as he pulled onto Thompson Avenue.

Alex had been thinking the same thing the whole way home.

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“Yeah, I know. I wasn’t expecting that,” he said as Dale pulled into the parking lot of the H.U.B. Alex had spoken to Ivy several times at the Brick House, but not enough to size up her “Captain” status. “I think I had her pegged as a Picard.”

Dale turned off the car and flipped off the lights as he opened his door to get out. “Me, too.”

It wasn’t that Ivy being a Kirk-type person was a bad thing, just a little unexpected. Alex was a Picard and took things very slowly with precision and lots of thought and preparation. Ivy had just walked right up to him and tapped him on his shoulder.

“Oh well,” Alex said as he got out of the car and started to walk towards the front doors of the H.U.B. “I suppose it takes all kinds.”

“Indeed,” Dale added as the two of them walked through the lobby and into the elevator waiting for them with doors wide open. “So are we really going to watch that movie tomorrow night?”

Alex turned to Dale with a confused look on his face as he said, “Of course we’re going. Why wouldn’t we?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to go or you were just being polite,” Dale said as he pressed “3” on the panel in front of him. “What the hell is *It’s A Wonderful Life* anyway?”

Alex contorted his face into the most confused look he could possibly make as he stared at Dale. “ARE YOU SERIOUS?! How have you never seen ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’ before?!”

The elevator doors opened at the third floor as Dale defended himself against Alex's apparent disgust. "I don't know. I just haven't ever seen it. I don't know if I have ever even heard of it before. Is it famous or something?"

Alex was so shocked that the doors almost closed on him before he made it out of the elevator. They walked down the hallway as he tried his best to explain how much of a holiday classic it was and always would be.

"Well, we're definitely going now. I can't believe that you haven't seen that movie. I almost feel sad for you, Dale."

Dale simply looked back at Alex with little or no expression on his face. "You're weird. Goodnight."

Dale's door was closed and he was gone before Alex was able to explain in any further detail how great of a movie it was. He thought about all of the great characters and the great ending for a few moments until he realized he was standing by himself in the middle of the hallway facing Dale's closed door. He turned around, unlocked his own door, and walked inside to get some sleep. He was very tired and it didn't take more than a few minutes to get from his head hitting his pillow to his mind running wild.

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CHAPTER TEN

The next morning came and went along with the day's schedule of classes. Alex actually went to all of his classes today, which was rare... especially for a Friday. The extra time in each class made him feel better about the upcoming finals he would soon have to take. Make no mistake, he barely paid any attention to what was going on and sometimes napped here and there, but the extra time "in the class" made him feel better.

The previous night's dreams were fairly standard considering the events of the evening. Alex found himself in a library at one point behind the counter with a similar version of the girl Fax flirted with while he and Dale were studying. That girl was mixed and matched with what he assumed were pieces of Ivy

from the grocery store. It was a weird dream, but as far as anyone else was concerned, all of his dreams were weird. Alex just kept it to himself and went about his day. He looked forward to introducing Dale to the American holiday tradition that was *It's A Wonderful Life* later on at the Brick House.

Alex stood in front of his closet attempting to size up his wardrobe choice for the evening. The weather had changed drastically in the last few weeks and his normal attire of a polo and jeans would no longer suffice.

I guess I can sport one of these bitchin' argyle sweaters. He carefully looked through his clothing options in his closet. *So many choices, so little time.*

Alex decided to stick with his normal jeans and simply pair them with a very festive plain blue sweater. "Nice," he said to himself as he checked out his choice in his mirror. He gathered up his things and walked out into the hallway to meet up with Dale.

Dale was stepping out of his own room just as Alex locked up his door to leave. Alex held up his hands in a very obvious "How do I look?" motion to see what Dale thought about his choice in festive fashion. Dale stared for a few seconds and then let out a sigh.

"Really?" Dale said as he shook his head at Alex. "A blue sweater, for Christmas?"

Alex hadn't really put a lot of thought into the color scheme of the season. He simply picked something that was clean and

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not wrinkled beyond belief. "I don't see what's so great about *your* clothes, you ass." Alex said as he stared back at Dale and his red long-sleeved shirt.

Dale just shook his head at Alex as he started towards the elevator. "I don't expect you to walk around with a frickin' reindeer on your shirt. Just wear something that looks like you're trying, ya know?" Dale pressed the "down" button on the elevator panel. "Blue is fine, just forget about it, you weirdo."

Alex smiled as the doors opened and he and Dale stepped into the elevator. He didn't really care how he looked and pushing Dale's buttons was great.

They continued their discussion of acceptable clothing choices all the way to the Brick House, where it was very busy, even for a Friday night. Alex began to explain why *It's A Wonderful Life* was such a good movie as they walked up to the front door.

"It really sets the tone for the season. It makes you appreciate everything you have, right around the time when you might start getting caught up in things that you want," Alex explained as he pulled open the front door of the Brick House Café and walked inside.

"Dude, seriously, just let me watch the damn movie." Dale said as he looked around for a place to sit. "I've heard so much hype about this movie lately that there's no way it can live up to it."

Alex barely heard any of Dale's request to stop talking because he was so amazed at his own previous statement.

That was some deep stuff, Alex... appreciate what you have... things that you want... I'm good. He was so impressed with himself that he almost ran right into Ivy as she passed in front of them.

"Hey Dale. Hey Alex. Glad to see you could make it," she said as she shot a little wink in Alex's direction. Alex wanted to wink back, as a courtesy, but realized he apparently wasn't very good at winking. He just stood there squinting like he had something in his eye. Dale found a few seats in the corner of the room and occupied one of them right away.

"Did you see that? She winked at you," Dale stated as Alex took a seat across from him.

"Yeah," Alex replied as he nonchalantly picked up a menu to see if there were any special holiday choices available this evening.

Dale laughed to himself as he reached across the table and pulled the menu away from Alex.

"Oh, come on, man!" Dale said as he stared at Alex. "Maybe she winked at you for a reason. Did you ever think about that?"

The thought had never crossed Alex's mind. The truth of the matter was that he had only spoken to Ivy in the midst of ordering coffee and scones and the occasional grocery store encounter. She was definitely an attractive girl. He considered himself handsome enough for her, possibly.

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“Well?” Dale asked as he stared in Alex’s direction. “What are you going to do about it?”

Dale waited as he watched Alex and his brain try to size up the situation. Alex was in no way a ladies’ man and wouldn’t recognize the signs of a girl making a move on him at all. He was a Picard man. He planned and plotted and even schemed, when necessary. This type of unprovoked action made no sense to him. *But wait. She’s a Kirk.*

“Oh come on.” Dale said (a little louder this time) as he threw his hands up in disgust. “You’re not that blind, are you? I think she likes you.”

Alex was having a hard time with the situation, but was saved from the topic at hand as Tom appeared from the kitchen with an announcement.

“Hey guys, the Brick House Café would like to thank everyone for coming out tonight to enjoy this holiday classic with us. We are going to dim the lights now and we ask that everyone keep their conversations under control so that we can all hear the movie. Thanks again, and enjoy!”

The lights dimmed as everyone turned their chairs toward the large television in the far corner. Alex put up his hands in a motion to silently let Dale know that their conversation would have to be put on hold. Alex knew it was a cheap way out, but he would take it either way.

Dale whispered, “You’re a damn chicken,” to Alex as he turned his chair to face the television. “And another thing,” he

said as he leaned over the table towards Alex. "This better be the best damn movie I've ever laid eyes on or I'm going to be pissed."

Alex just laughed as he watched the movie start up. Not much was said over the course of the next several hours. There were people coming and going, but for the most part everyone stayed put. Alex made it through what seemed like a gallon of coffee, a sandwich, and half of a scone by the time *George Bailey* was reunited with his family. He smiled as he mouthed along with the famous lines. "Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings."

Alex looked around at Dale every few minutes near the end to see how he would handle the final moments of the film. The scene where all the different townspeople came through and gave money to save *George Bailey* always got to Alex, and he fought his hardest to hold back every little tear that tried to inch its way out of his eyes.

The lights were raised back to their normal level as the credits began to roll. Everyone was standing and stretching and checking their watches for the time. Alex noticed Dale wiping something out of his eyes when he thought no one was looking.

"So, what did you think?" Alex asked as he stared directly at Dale and his red eyes.

Dale started to sniffle a bit and rub his nose as he tried to hide the tears he let slip out. "Yeah, it was pretty good."

Alex couldn't resist himself. "Are your eyes bothering you,

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Dale?"

Dale started to pick up his plate and mug as he explained to Alex that his allergies were bothering him. Alex didn't want to call him out in front of everyone, so he just went along with it.

"Yeah, maybe somebody in here has a cat. You're allergic to cats, right?" Alex smirked as he stood up and pushed in his chair. "I'll be right back. I have to use the restroom. I'll see if anyone has any allergy meds for ya, big guy." Dale simply ignored Alex and stayed in his chair.

On his way back from the bathroom Alex saw Tom talking to a few people as they were leaving.

"Goodnight, guys. Be safe out there. Thanks again for coming out." Tom said as he waved to some people as they left.

"What's up?" Alex asked as he walked towards Tom. "Nice turnout for the movie, huh?"

Tom grabbed a few plates and mugs off of the table beside him and carried them with him to the counter to help clean up.

"Oh yeah. Great turnout for a great movie," Tom said as he sat the dishes on the counter. "I hear the coffee around this place isn't too bad, either." He said as he smiled and leaned against the counter.

"Yeah, I love that movie. I've seen it twenty five times if I've seen it once, and the ending still gets me every time." Alex said as he leaned up against the counter with Tom. "I wonder why

that is. I know exactly what's going to happen and I still have to hold back tears each time I see it, ya know?"

Tom smiled as Alex spoke. "That's good to hear, Alex." Tom said as he put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "First of all, it's nice when a man is man enough to admit he has feelings. Secondly, it's good to see that you can appreciate a classic scene like that one at the end."

Alex smiled back at Tom. Tom was great for advice and conversation about just about anything. It was nice to know that Tom respected something about him in return, even if it was just his taste in movies.

"There's a reason that the ending resonates like that with people. It's a situation that every one of us has thought about at some point or another. And, if you haven't yet, you will."

Alex thought about what Tom was saying and tried to make sense of it as best he could. "What's that?" he asked as he stared at Tom with a confused expression.

"When you die," Tom clearly stated as he leaned there against the counter. "Are you telling me that you have never thought about it?"

Alex thought for a moment and tried to come up with a decent response, but could only muster up "No."

Tom laughed as he took in Alex's response. "I forget sometimes how much younger you guys are than me. I suppose a twenty-something shouldn't be wasting his time on depressing

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things like that.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever even been to a funeral,” Alex added as he continued to attempt his part of this conversation. “I’ve seen a lot of them in movies and television, but that’s about it.”

Tom laughed again at Alex’s response. “It’s okay to not know anything about death, Alex. I’m not giving you a quiz or anything. I’m just trying to explain to you why that particular scene means so much to so many people. It’s not just about funerals, or for *George Bailey’s* case... the vision of what could have been, it’s about the mark you make on the people you meet along the way.”

Alex adjusted to get a better position to try and absorb all of Tom’s knowledge. He wanted to hear every word.

“The thing is, Alex, that none of us are here very long and some people, like *George Bailey*, influence more than their fair share of lives along the way. It’s amazing when all of those people from Bedford Falls come over and start giving whatever they can to try to help this man who has meant so much to their lives and their community.

A few more people walked past as Alex listened to every word Tom spoke, like a lecture he actually cared about hearing. He thought about how he would actually love to take notes on this instead of some crap about the economy.

“Goodnight, Tom!” a few girls shouted as they walked out of the Brick House.

“Goodnight. Be safe.” Tom replied as he waved to them all as they left.

“Do you plan on getting married?” Tom asked Alex after he finished saying goodnight to another group as they walked by.

Alex was a little startled by this question, but managed to come up with a solid “probably” as he stared back at Tom, wondering where he was going with this topic.

“Weddings and funerals are more similar than people admit, and I don’t mean that weddings *are* funerals like people always joke. I’m serious. A wedding is a major event in your life, to say the least... just like a funeral.”

Alex gave a courteous head-nod every now and then to show Tom that he was paying attention.

“It’s all about the list of people who come to those things. You can learn a lot about a person from those two events. Look at it this way. For a wedding, you would try to gather up all of the people in your life that you think you have touched in some positive way, right?”

Alex nodded in agreement. He understood this part at least.

“Well, that is the list of people you know will come. These are friends and family that you want to share something special with, and celebrate. These people obviously mean something to you or you wouldn’t have invited them, right?”

Alex nodded again, and threw in an additional, “Right,” just

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to show he was getting it.

“Then you have the funeral. You will never get to see this take place, but you have your list of people you know will come to it. Again, these are all people you know you have influenced in some way enough to make them take a few hours out of their day to come and pay a tribute to your life. Everyone can put together some sort of a list if they need to. Then you get to the interesting part of it all.” Tom said as another smile crept across his face.

Alex was wondering how this was just now the interesting part. He had been interested from the very beginning and was almost overwhelmed at this point.

Tom put his hand on Alex’s shoulder again and very calmly started speaking.

“It’s not about those two lists, Alex. It’s not about the ones you knew would come, it’s about the ones you didn’t.”

Alex suddenly began to understand exactly what Tom had been talking about the whole time. It all started to make sense.

“*George Bailey* knew his family and friends loved him. He knew they would have been there for his wedding and his funeral, but he got a chance to see who he didn’t know would be there. That man inspired an entire community. He had no idea until that very moment just how much of an impact he had on other people’s lives. That must be some moment, Alex.”

Alex was at a loss for words, which was not unlike him at all,

but he wished that he could come up with something to add to Tom's wonderful life lesson.

"That's amazing," Alex said as he searched for words to express how he felt.

Tom laughed again as he slapped Alex on his shoulder. "Amazing?" he said as he laughed. "Nothing amazing here, Alex, just a coffee shop owner who loves that movie."

Alex wanted to ask Tom so many questions about the movie, life, Ivy, you name it, but Dale and his "allergies" were heading their way.

"Thanks for that, Tom." Alex said in his most sincere voice. "I never thought about it like that."

"No problem. Always a pleasure." Tom added as Dale walked up to the two of them.

"I thought you were going to the bathroom, dude?" Dale asked in an obviously irritated voice. "I've been sitting over there waiting for you forever, man."

Alex knew it had only been around ten minutes since he left his table.

"Damn, Dale. Your allergies make you all snippy." Alex said as he laughed and shook Tom's hand before they left. "Thanks again for the talk, Tom. See you around."

Tom smiled and thanked Dale and Alex again for coming out

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as they left.

“You guys be safe.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning after the late night movie at the Brick House found Alex awake much earlier than he expected for a Saturday. He returned to the H.U.B. right after leaving the Brick House and went right to bed. He felt very rested considering his dream-filled night complete with It's A Wonderful Life characters running through his mind over and over as he slept. He picked up a mug of fresh coffee from the lobby and walked out onto the steps of his building to think through everything that happened the night before.

That was something, he thought to himself as he watched people begin to appear here and there across the campus in front of him. *I just don't know what it was.*

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Alex sipped on his cup of happiness and began to think back to everything Tom said.

That man has it all figured out, I suppose.

Even with the sun now filling the courtyard in front of him it was still quite cold. He laughed to himself as he heard a group of people walking by discussing how they “just couldn’t wait for it to warm up...”

He thought about Ivy and how intrigued he was by everything about her. Just as he was thinking about all things Brick House Café, a single sheet of paper blew towards him and landed at his feet. He picked it up, curious as to what it said. “Christmas Party @ the Brick House!” was written across the top of the flyer in bright red, followed by “Friday, December 18th, bring a friend!” across the bottom in bright green. “How very festive,” he thought as he continued to examine the flyer. Suddenly, Alex realized what was going on. This was classic. Flyers for Christmas Parties didn’t just appear out of nowhere. This was a sign. His mind starting racing through his movie catalogue of scenes just like this one where the main character realized something he needed to know because of a simple twist of fate... like a randomly placed flyer.

Alex decided then and there that this flyer meant something, he just wasn’t sure what that could be. He read the flyer over and over, looking for some type of historically cinematic clue. “Friday, December 18th... bring a friend,” he read to himself out loud, unaware of the odd looks he was getting from people walking by. *Maybe that’s it,* he thought as he stared at the flyer.

Maybe I'm supposed to bring somebody to this party. Alex's mind started to go around in circles, analyzing and re-analyzing the flyer like it was written in some kind of a code. He had just started in on his fifteenth scan of the cryptic document as Dale walked out of the H.U.B and sat down next to him.

"What the hell are you doing up this early on a Saturday?" Dale asked as he took a sip from his very own fresh cup of sunshine.

"Dude, you're up, too. It can't be that early." Alex responded.

Dale nodded in approval as he continued to drink from his mug. He then reached out and took the flyer from Alex to examine.

"Christmas Party, huh?" Dale noted as he read over the flyer. "Where'd you get this?"

Alex explained the serendipitous arrival of the flyer to an unimpressed Dale and waited for some type of input on the situation. Alex was still quite amazed with the whole experience... Dale was not.

"You're an idiot." Dale said as he sat his mug down on the steps between them. "It's a flyer, man. And we aren't in a movie."

Alex attempted to understand Dale's take on the flyer conundrum, but was having a hard time letting go of the fact that fate had stepped in.

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“How can you say that, Dale? A flyer... for *this* party... lands at *my* feet... That means nothing to you?” Alex asked as he snatched the piece of paper back from Dale.

“Listen, man. It’s windy out here. Those flyers are stapled to poles and trees and you name it all over this campus. Do you really think it’s more than a coincidence that one of them just *happened* to land on these steps?” Dale asked as he took back to the paper from Alex to re-examine it. “It’s just a flyer.”

“But what’s with the part about bringing a friend?” Alex responded.

“You mean the part where a business wants you to bring someone with you to their business when *you* come? I don’t think that’s as much fate as it is marketing,” Dale added. “Look, if you are looking for a reason to ask out Ivy, I’m all for it, but don’t take her to where she works on a date, man.”

Alex stared back at Dale like he had just told him he was an alien. “Ask out Ivy?” he asked as he continued to stare at Dale. “Why would I ask out Ivy?”

Dale shook his head and put a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Look, I don’t know what kind of a sign you’re waiting for, but come on. That girl obviously likes you. And don’t act like you don’t like her.”

Alex didn’t understand any of what was taking place. “How do you figure she likes me? And what have I done to make you think I am interested in her?”

The look on Dale's face was a mixture of shock and disbelief. "Are you serious?" he said as he looked at Alex. "That girl comes up to you every time we are in the Brick House, even when we aren't in her section. She came up to you in the grocery store to make sure you were coming to the movie. She winked at you, dude. She frickin' winked at your goofy ass," Dale added as he smiled and slapped Alex on his back. "And you... you have done your fair share of flirting with her, too, not to mention how we conveniently go to the Brick House on nights when she is working. I think you've memorized her schedule or something."

Alex wanted to argue with Dale and make some sort of an attempt to stand up for his side, but couldn't find anything to argue against. He found that everything Dale said was completely true.

"Hell, you probably know if she's working right now, don't you?" Dale asked as he took another sip from his mug.

"Whatever," Alex responded as he laughed at Dale's insinuation.

"Well, I'm surprised you don't know," Dale said. "You seem to know when she'll be there every other day of the week."

They both laughed and drank their coffees as they sat there on the steps of the H.U.B. Alex tried to clear his mind as best he could, but he found he had lost all control as he said under his breath "she comes in at nine..."

Dale stopped mid-sip and turned to look at Alex. "She

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what?"

Alex tried not to say it, but he couldn't help himself. He wasn't exactly good at covering his tracks either. "Excuse me?" he added in his most innocent voice.

"Wow! You really do know her schedule, you freak." Dale shouted as he sat his mug down on the steps again. "What's wrong with you?"

"What?!" Alex responded. "I just remember talking to her during the week and she said she was looking forward to watching the movie but dreaded having to be there at nine the next morning, that's all."

"Look, man. I don't know what else to say to you except for this... go down there and ask that girl out already!" Dale exclaimed as he stood up, mug in hand, and turned back towards the dorms. "You wanted fate, well you've got it. I'll play the messenger if that's what it takes. The flyer blew over, I came outside, you are weird, and you need to go now and ask her out before she realizes that she's way too hot for you."

Alex wasn't sure what was happening, but he found himself standing up to go to the Brick House to ask out Ivy.

"I'm going to do it," Alex said as he walked up to Dale and handed him his empty coffee mug. "Put this back for me. I have something I apparently need to do."

Dale smiled as Alex turned to walk away. "Hey," Dale said as Alex started down the steps again. "You planning on

walking?"

In all of the commotion Alex had somehow forgotten the small detail of how he would get to the Brick House to ask out Ivy. He lacked any transportation of his own.

"I guess," Alex responded. "That is, unless you want to let me borrow your car."

Dale took a few moments to formulate an opinion on Alex driving his car, then decided there was really no way he could damage a '93 Corolla. "I guess you can borrow it, but come right back after you chicken out. Don't waste all morning driving around trying to come up with a good reason you couldn't go through with it."

"Wow," Alex said as he followed Dale back up to his room to get his keys. "I don't know how I could get by without all of the unwavering support from friends like you."

"Hey, prove me wrong," Dale said as he handed Alex his keys. "I want to be wrong on this one. Come back and tell me all about it."

Dale shut his door and Alex made his way back down to Dale's Corolla. He was only a short drive away from his destiny, and he thought up ways to ask Ivy out on a date all the way to the Brick House.

Approximately thirty-five minutes later, Dale heard a knock at his door. He opened it to find Alex standing there with a rather shocked look on his face.

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"I knew it," Dale said as he laughed and turned to walk back to his bed. "You didn't do it."

Alex walked inside Dale's room and sat down at Dale's desk in the corner. "You're right, Dale. *I* didn't do it."

"I can't believe you. That girl likes you and you just chickened out," Dale said as he threw up his hands in disgust. "Now what are you going to do?"

"We are going out tomorrow night," Alex said as a smile crept across his face.

"You liar. You said you didn't do it," Dale responded as he sat up at the end of his bed.

"I *didn't* do it," Alex began to explain. "I came up with three possible scenarios on the ride over, walked into the Brick House, and before I could decide which one to go with... BAM!"

"What the hell do you mean, BAM?" Dale asked as he leaned towards Alex. "Did you frickin' run into her or something?"

"No, you idiot. I started to say 'Hey Ivy, would you like to go with me to dinner sometime?,' when she cut me off. I got to 'Hey Ivy' when SHE asked ME out."

Dale's jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me?"

"Dude, do you think I could make this stuff up?" Alex asked as he continued to smile ear to ear. "I was so shocked that I

almost forgot to say yes.”

“Well, I must say, Lady Captain Kirk is definitely in control of this relationship,” Dale said as he laughed and slapped Alex on his back again. “I would say ‘good job’, but it sounds to me like you didn’t do a damn thing. Where are you going to take her?”

Alex’s smile disappeared as the thought of the actual date entered his mind. “I have no idea,” he said as he looked over at Dale. “She gave me her number on a napkin and told me to call her. She said she would talk to me later and walked off to take an order. I didn’t know what to do, so I just left and came back here.”

Dale started laughing hysterically. “You are something else, man. You got picked up by a woman and ran back home. Priceless.”

Alex laughed along with Dale as they went over and over what just happened. Alex retold the story three or four times and Dale laughed a little more each time he told it. Dale was having a great time reliving the events of the morning. Alex, however, was attempting to wrap his mind around what he was going to do about Sunday night.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Saturday afternoon was uneventful, but the evening crept by at an unusually slow pace even for Alex. He stayed in his room the entire time except for a period of an hour or so in which he went to the cafeteria and had dinner with Fax. It was very cold out, they served chili, it wasn't bad.

Alex thought about letting Fax in on the information about Ivy and their upcoming date, but he decided against it. Fax had a way of attempting to spice up things that didn't need spicing up. Alex decided to attempt to plan the evening on his own. Besides, the last time Fax was involved in the planning of anything they all found themselves in a Casino in another state at five o'clock on a Tuesday morning.

Fax went back home after dinner and Alex went back to the H.U.B. He wasn't even sure how he managed to get back there with all of the stuff running through his mind. *Where should I take her? What time should we go? What will I wear?... What will SHE wear?* Alex had always thought about taking a girl to a coffee shop for their first date, until he realized that *his* date worked at the very coffee shop in which he wanted to go.

How am I supposed to know what to do here? He thought to himself as he waited on the elevator doors to open and take him up to his floor. The evening was creeping along. Even the elevator seemed to be running slowly tonight.

Alex walked into his room and locked the door behind him. He cleaned out his pockets and sat his belongings on the table by the door. He was in for the night. He couldn't possibly go anywhere else tonight. He had too much planning to do for the big date.

Alex took his phone out of his pocket and pulled out the napkin with Ivy's number. He entered her number in very carefully and prepared himself to send the perfect text. He stared for several minutes before coming up with his masterpiece... "What's up?" He hit "send" and waited for a response as his mind began racing with images of Ivy receiving the text on her phone.

His thoughts began to wander as he sat down on his bed, staring out of his solitary window. *Why did she ask me out?* he thought. *I mean, I am glad she did, but why?* His mind got the best of him and he put his head on his pillow without a thought. *Is*

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there a guideline for first dates that I should know about? Is there a pamphlet for this, or what? he thought to himself as he closed his eyes for what he thought was only a blink...

Beachfront property stretched out as far as the eye could see. The waves were crashing all around him and the closest house was at least a mile from where he stood. Alex quickly realized what was going on, but decided he would look around for a bit and see just what his mind had cooked up for him. The sun was setting across the ocean in front of him and the scene could not possibly get any more romantic. *A little cheesy for my tastes, but I'll stick around to see what happens,* he thought as he walked along the beach in his dreams.

Out of nowhere a woman appeared on horseback, long hair blowing in the wind... which also appeared out of nowhere. "I feel like Fabio is going to pop up in here somewhere," he said out loud as he looked around to see if he was alone with the mysterious lady on her pony. The rider came closer and stopped just feet away from where Alex was standing.

"Hey there," the mysterious rider said as she tossed her hair in a very "Sassoon" kind of way. Alex had to hold back a laugh as he listened to the woman on the horse deliver her line.

"Hey there, yourself, lady," he responded as he held out his hand to help the woman down. *This is so corny,* he thought. *Did I fall asleep with my TV on Lifetime or something?*

The next few minutes were very strange as Alex attempted to figure out just what the hell was going on. The woman who stepped down from the horse was beautiful, but in a very

generic way. Alex had the source of her appearance narrowed down to a girl in the lobby of the H.U.B and one on the front steps of the building from that morning just as a large bee flew into the scene and starting buzzing all around his head. He swatted and swatted, but it wouldn't stop. He felt like it was about to sting him on his chin right as he woke up on his bed in his dorm.

"What the hell was that?" he said to himself as he grabbed his phone. He had drifted off with it on his chest and when it started vibrating it slid down and hit his chin. He looked at the small screen on the front of his phone which read "1 New Text." He quickly opened it, eager to see if it was from Ivy. "Not much. Where are we going tomorrow?" was written on his screen. Apparently the ball was now in his court. He quickly started sifting through all of the possibilities for their first date... and couldn't decide on any of them.

"Keep it simple, Alex," he told himself as he stood up and began to pace around his room. "It's not a big deal, it's just dinner, that's all..."

Just as Alex was narrowing down his possible destinations, he received another text from Ivy. "Hey, just surprise me tomorrow. I'll drive if you pick the restaurant. Deal?"

Alex smiled as he read the text. "This chick is as take-charge as they come," he said as he sat back down on his bed. "I like it."

Alex replied with a short and sweet, "Sounds great," closed his phone and sat it on the table beside him. "Now I just have to

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figure out where to take her,” he said as he closed his eyes again.
How hard can it be?

He quickly found himself back at the same beach from before, but without the cheesy sunset and woman on horseback. This time it was the middle of the day and there was a very heated all-female volleyball game going on just to his right. He smiled as he took a seat and put on his sunglasses to enjoy the rest of the match.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The following morning Alex was up and going before noon... a small miracle for the weekend. He still had some things to do before the big first date tonight. First he needed to decide when and where this date would take place. Then, he needed to go to the Mall and find something to wear. Normally Alex would just wear something from his extensive collection of polos and jeans, but this seemed to call for something a little more special.

Just before noon, Alex walked across the hallway and knocked on Dale's door.

"What do you want?" Dale grunted from inside.

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“And good morning to you, too,” Alex replied. “I need a favor.”

Alex paused, awaiting a response from Dale... nothing came. “Well, aren’t you going to ask me what it is I need?”

“Nope.” Dale said with little hesitation.

Alex thought for a moment about just walking to the mall, then realized how easily he could remedy the situation with Dale.

“Dude, take me to the mall and I will buy you some coffee, deal?”

Dale reluctantly agreed as he opened his door to let Alex walk in. Alex waited while Dale threw on some clothes and then they headed out for the mall.

Alex had narrowed his possible dinner destinations to two choices. There was a very nice seafood restaurant right in the middle of town that had received excellent reviews. There was also an Italian restaurant only a few miles from campus that was a recipient of very similar high marks. *Seafood or Italian*, he thought as Dale drove towards the mall. *How am I supposed to know where to take someone on a first date?*

Alex decided to ask for some help. Since Dale was the only other person in the car... he was the only option. “So, Dale, I have my big date with Ivy tonight and I was wondering where to...”

“Italian. Done.” Dale said before Alex could finish his question. “Anything but seafood and you’re golden. You never know people’s tastes on seafood, but everybody can find something to eat at an Italian place. Case closed.”

Alex smiled as he looked forward at the front entrance to the mall straight ahead of them. *That was easy enough*, he thought as Dale pulled into an empty parking space.

They both walked inside on separate missions. Alex had to find something to wear that didn’t make him look so damn ordinary. Dale... well Dale just wanted some coffee.

The matter of the promised coffee was tended to right away at the Starbucks in the food court. Alex and Dale each decided on Peppermint Mochas since they were the seasonal special and headed onward in search of clothing.

“What should I get?”

Dale sipped on his mocha and simply shrugged his shoulders.

“Wow, you’re a lot of help,” Alex said as he turned away from Dale and started walking towards the Gap.

“Hey, I never said I was going to dress you,” Dale added as he followed behind. “I’m just the driver.”

Alex went through five different stores before he found the proper attire for his big events. He found a nice pair of jeans, a white button-up, a classic blue button-up, and a brown sweater. He assumed he could mix and match for the date and the

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Christmas party and save a little money.

Alex and Dale left the mall and headed back to the dorms. They had managed to waste over two hours at the mall. Alex was fine with wasting time because he was ready to go on his date. Dale wasn't so happy about killing time on a Sunday at the mall.

"All I'm saying is you could've walked if you knew you were going to take two hours," Dale explained in frustration as he drove them back to the H.U.B. "Some of us have better things to do than play chauffeur and fashion advisor on a Sunday."

Alex thought to himself about how little Dale actually would've done if he hadn't accompanied him to the mall, but decided not to say anything. He wanted to make sure he had access to Dale's chauffeur service in the future... so he just let Dale vent as he drove them home.

Alex walked into his dorm room and closed the door behind him. He pulled out his new clothes and removed the tags on each item. He then ironed all of it, even the sleeves, and hung each item on a hanger on his closet door. He looked at his new clothes and started to think about the upcoming date. He had to do something to take his mind off of things for a few more hours. He settled down on the corner of his bed and turned on his television. *The Fifth Element* was on, and available in high definition, although Alex did not have an HD television. Watching Mila Jovovich run around in a stretchy orange plastic swimsuit was enough to distract just about any guy for a few hours.

In a few hours, Bruce Willis managed to save the universe and get the girl. Alex also managed some impressive feats, such as getting dressed and texting Ivy about dinner. He sent her a message asking her to pick him up in front of the H.U.B. around 6:30. She responded, "See you then," and Alex's date was officially underway. He gathered his standard gear including wallet, keys, etc. and headed out into the hallway. His trek down to the lobby of the H.U.B seemed to take longer than normal. He was quite sure this was because he was getting nervous, and rightfully so. He was not prepared for this date with Ivy.

"How do you prepare for a date, anyway?" he said to himself as the doors opened to the lobby. "What the hell am I doing?"

Alex walked through the lobby and outside to the front of the building. He had just stepped off of the last step as he saw a car appear out of the corner of his eye.

"This is her, I can feel it," he said as he waved and took a step onto the curb towards the approaching car. He then took another step back as the car sped past him with two kids pressing their noses against the windows as they smiled.

Guess not, he thought as he turned back to the H.U.B., trying to look cool. Just then he heard a "honk-honk" from behind. This time it was Ivy.

The next several hours were the best hours of Alex's life. He had so much in common with Ivy that he couldn't believe what was happening. He and Ivy talked about everything under the sun as they feasted on chicken parmigiana and pasta. Some

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might think it was nothing to order the same thing at a restaurant, not Alex. This was a meeting of the minds. *Two rival Captains agreeing on dinner is no laughing matter*, he thought as he caught himself staring into Ivy's eyes. They continued their conversation for another hour as they sat and ordered their after-dinner coffees. Alex took his with sweet n' low, Ivy chose Splenda. "Oh well," Alex said as he shook his head in disappointment at Ivy. "Nobody's perfect." They both laughed as they stirred their coffees.

Ivy pulled her car up to the curb in front of Alex's dorm. "I had a really great time," she said as she turned off her car. "I hope we can do it again sometime soon."

Alex turned to Ivy and smiled. This wasn't a normal smile, it was huge. He tried to hold it back, but he couldn't. He was quite thrilled with how the night had gone. He only had one more pressing issue before he could call it a night. He looked into Ivy's eyes and then looked away. He didn't know what to do.

What the hell do I do now?, he thought as he stared at Ivy, who just happened to be smiling right back at him. *Do I kiss her? Is that what I should do now or should I wait? This is only our first date. Is that wrong or should I...*

Captain Kirk had struck again. Ivy had apparently waited long enough for Alex to make his move, so she took matters into her own hands... or lips in this instance. She planted a sweet and soft kiss right on Alex's lips as he sat there, astonished.

Holy crap, he thought as she kissed him. *This girl is amazing.*

He pressed his lips softly against Ivy's and waited for her to pull away. He wasn't about to stop the kiss that *he* didn't even start.

Ivy pulled back and smiled. "There, now that's out of the way," she said as she started up her car. "Text me sometime."

Alex was almost paralyzed at this point, but somehow managed to get up out of the car and close the door. Ivy pulled away from the curb and waived as she drove away.

I'm not sure what just happened, but I liked it, he thought as he turned to walk up the steps of his building. *That girl is something else.*

Alex smiled all the way up to his room, where he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. He was very tired, and quite happy.

The rest of the week was all build-up for Friday. The few classes Alex had left before then weren't giving exams, so he just had to attend and say some goodbye's to some teachers. He texted with Ivy and even saw her at the Brick House on a coffee run. Ivy had a busy schedule this week due to a few people leaving town early for the holidays, so Alex wasn't able to make plans with her before Friday. She had already requested off for the Christmas party on Friday, which was a little ironic since she had already said she would be attending. "I want to go and enjoy it, not work it," she explained to Alex in one of her texts. "I want people to serve coffee and scones to me for once."

The party on Friday was a huge celebration of the end of the semester and the Christmas holiday. Most of the people heading

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home for the holiday would be leaving Saturday morning, so this was one last blowout before everyone parted ways. It was also the second time Alex would get to spend any significant time with Ivy since their date, and he was looking forward to it greatly. Only one thing stood in the way... his presentation on Friday. One last class and he was done with this semester. That presentation had loomed over Alex for weeks now, and he was ready to be done with it. He went to sleep on Thursday a full hour earlier than normal just to be extra prepared for his presentation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The last day of the semester was basically the biggest day of the year for Alex in many ways. Not only did he have the Brick House Christmas party later that night, but he was about to give his presentation in his Intro to Business class. This wasn't just about a grade to Alex, although it would count towards a large portion of his grade for the semester. Alex had put a lot of work into preparing for this presentation and had taken it all very seriously. As he sat there alongside his fellow back-row warriors he tried to decide which presentation to give. His head was pounding. He asked the girl to his right for something for his headache and after a few moments of digging around in a purse that was bigger than she was she handed him a small bottle of pills.

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“Just take the bottle,” she said. “There are only three or four pills in there and I have a new one in this purse somewhere.”

“Thanks a lot,” Alex replied as he popped the cap on the bottle and swallowed all four of the remaining pills.

Alex had taken the time over the previous weeks to prepare two different speeches and accompanying presentations. He went back and forth between real estate agent and investment banker as the girl in the front of the room rambled on about being a nurse.

It probably doesn't even matter which one I choose, Alex thought to himself. They are both good presentations.

The girl in the front was now walking away from the podium and making her way back to her seat. From the look of things she had finished and was a success. Dr. Archer stepped up to the podium after the girl had taken her seat.

“Alright, everyone. We have one more presentation remaining and I can cut you guys loose for the semester,” Dr. Archer said as she looked up to where Alex was sitting.

Alex could feel the tension building as Dr. Archer began to say his name. The words “Alex Kinnet” began to form on her lips and the rest of the class joined her in staring in Alex’s direction. Everything went into slow-motion. The excitement of almost being done with the semester was almost as obvious on the rest of the students’ faces as the dread of having to give this speech was on Alex’s. Alex grabbed both speeches and

presentations and started to make his way to the front of the room when the slow-motion of things began to make everything much clearer. As Alex looked around the room he noticed everyone smiling and whispering to each other as they sipped their coffees. That's when it all hit him. Over half of the students in that classroom were drinking coffee. He could look out across the room and count over twenty cups, each with a brick pattern on it. They sipped and smiled and looked genuinely happy at that very moment. His mind began to race, but ultimately settled on the Brick House. He knew what he had to do. He took the podium with a nervous smile.

"My name is Alex Kinnet and I don't have a presentation for you today." Dr. Archer and at least half of the class stared back at him with a rather displeased look at this statement.

Alex was into it now. There was no turning back. "Well, to be honest, I actually have *two* presentations for you... but I'm not going to use either of them." Dr. Archer's puzzled look intensified with every word out of Alex's mouth.

"I put together two presentations over these last six weeks and they are both fairly good, but not good enough. I have a wonderful graph about real estate sales that I'm sure would impress even Dr. Archer." Dr. Archer smiled at this statement, but couldn't hide her confusion with what was happening in her classroom. "I also have an impressive speech about being an investment broker that may be some of my best work. I just can't use either of those today because that isn't what I want to do." The entire class was listening at this point, along with one intrigued professor. Alex was too far into it to turn back now. He had to finish it.

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“As I walked up here today I noticed all of you sitting there enjoying your coffee. I also noticed that all of you got your coffee from the Brick House Café.” The entire class began to look around at all of the cups on the tables in the room.

“The Brick House Café isn’t even on campus. Each of you got that coffee and brought it with you to class. There is a coffee shop downstairs and another one in the cafeteria, but none of you got it there, did you?” The puzzled looks in the room were spreading like wildfire, but Alex continued.

“My point is that all of you went out of your way to get that coffee, and I know it wasn’t just because it tastes that much better than the other coffee shops here on campus. The Brick House Café is comfortable. It has that something special that keeps us all coming back for more. Yeah, they have great coffee and some really awesome scones, but that isn’t enough to keep us all going back there all of the time. They have all of those great people that work there that make us all feel special every time we walk through the doors. They have Tom, the owner. We all know him. We all probably consider Tom as a friend. He takes pride in his business and it shows. He doesn’t just brew coffee and bake pastries, he creates an environment within which people can be happy. I’m not saying that I want to be Tom or that I want to own a coffee shop... I mean... maybe I do, and maybe I will. I just want to create that type of environment in whatever it is I choose to do. Real estate may provide me with a lot of money, but how many of you know the guy that sold your parents’ their house? How many of you know the guy that set up your parents’ investments and retirement plans? There may be some wonderful investment brokers out there and I’m

sure there are some really great real estate agents in this world, but I don't know if any of them have what Tom has in his simple little café. Tom is a modern day George Bailey and that is exactly what I want to be. I want to be George Bailey. I want to love and to be loved. I want to create such an environment around me that people will go out of their way to share it with me."

Alex's speech came to an abrupt stop because he hadn't really thought about any of it and didn't know where to end it. He had just "winged-it" and wasn't sure what to do from here. Dr. Archer quickly came to his rescue with a small clap and was closely followed by the rest of the students. Alex didn't know what to do, so he just nodded in appreciation and walked back up to his seat. People were telling him "good job" and "nice speech" on his way to his seat. Even a few of the back-row warriors leaned over to congratulate him on his impromptu performance.

"Well, Mr. Kinnet," Dr. Archer said as she again took the podium. "That was a very passionate speech and a very interesting take on the assignment. It was also our last presentation for the day and for the semester! Have a wonderful Christmas break, you are all free to go!"

The class quickly emptied as Alex sat in his seat. He was in no hurry and wanted to soak in his accomplishment just a little longer before he had to go. He smiled as he slowly stood up and pushed in his chair.

I think I just gave a speech about being a character from a movie.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Alex smiled all the way back to his dorm room. *This may be the greatest day of my life*, he thought as he dropped his bag on the floor, cleaned out his pockets, and plopped down onto his bed. He was suddenly exhausted. He stared up at his ceiling and then to his lonely window. He looked over to his closet where his new outfit was hanging, ready for the party tonight. Everything seemed perfect. He then turned and faced the small table next to his bed. It had all of his stuff from his pockets strewn across it and in one corner a coffee cup from the Brick House. He just stared at it, trying to figure out just what had happened in his class.

“I must have gone crazy,” he said to himself as he lay there

staring at the cup. "I spent all of that time on those presentations and went with 'I want to be George Bailey' as my speech!"

Alex rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling again. He tried to imagine what Dr. Archer would be thinking when she entered his grades for the class.

"I am going to fail. I just know it. I didn't even have a presentation, just a speech!"

He turned his head back to the cup and examined every inch of it like it was hiding the answers to all of his questions. Just then he noticed something poking him in his hip. He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out the empty pill bottle from before.

"Oh, I guess I didn't throw that away," he said as he sat the bottle on the table and yawned. He was just about to roll back onto his back when he noticed something he hadn't noticed before. He picked up the bottle and read the label again. "May cause drowsiness" was written in small print across the bottom of the bottle. "Oh crap!" he shouted as he flipped the bottle over to read the dosage. "One tablet every 6 hours..." was written on the back. "This is not good," he said to himself as he felt the drowsiness the bottle spoke of creeping all over him. *I can't go to sleep now. I have to be at the party in four hours. I'll never wake up.*

Alex fought the drug induced coma he had brought upon himself for as long as he could, but knew he wasn't going to win. He managed to set an alarm on his phone just before his eyelids slammed shut. He couldn't fight it anymore.

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Alex was so sleepy in real life that he even felt a little drowsy in his dream. He found himself on the curb of a street that looked very familiar to him. *I've been here before*, he thought to himself as he staggered down the sidewalk towards a familiar building.

"I don't really have time for any of this today," he said as he looked up and realized that he was standing outside of the Brick House. "Yep, a coffee shop because I'm sleepy. I get it."

Alex walked up to the front of the building and opened the front door. He looked around to see who had made a special appearance in this dream, but didn't recognize anyone right away.

"What a bunch of ridiculously attractive people," he said as he walked up to the hostess stand to be seated. "I feel like I'm standing inside the pages of a magazine or something."

Alex had stepped into a room full of the most attractive group of people ever assembled. It was like a model convention took a coffee break and they all stopped at the Brick House. There were girls in bikinis, girls in skirts, and a group of brunettes all wearing what appeared to be some sort of a ski-team outfit. Alex laughed as he stared across the room and attempted to soak in all of the runway beauty in the room as a cute little red-head walked up to the counter and asked Alex, "How many?"

Alex answered, "Just one," and she led him to a table in the corner of the room. She waited until he was seated and said, "Your waitress will be right with you." Alex smiled as he noticed the red-head was wearing a cheerleading outfit from his

old high school. "Nicely done, brain!" he said as he looked down, unfolded his napkin, and stretched it across his lap. He had just raised his head back up when he saw someone standing there in front of him. It was Ivy.

"Hey there, Alex," Ivy said as she pulled out her pen and pad to take his order. "What are you having today?"

"Hey there yourself," Alex replied, a little puzzled at what was happening. "I'll have a cappuccino... and a scone please."

Ivy wrote down Alex's order and smiled. "Sounds great," she said. "I'll have it out in a few minutes." She then turned and walked back towards the kitchen. Alex took this opportunity to check out Ivy as she walked away. "*Not too bad,*" he thought as she turned and walked into the kitchen. Ivy was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and an apron that had Brick House stitched on the front. Alex laughed again as he realized Ivy's attire, however ordinary, was slightly more appropriate for a coffee house. *I like the bikinis, ladies, but it just doesn't make sense for this time of year.*

A few minutes later Ivy reappeared from the kitchen with Alex's order. She walked over and sat his cappuccino and scone down in front of him. She was smiling the entire time. Alex couldn't get over how much she was smiling. He looked up at her bright green eyes and would have sworn he saw them twinkle.

"You seem to be in a good mood," Alex said as he picked up his mug to take a sip.

Ivy just smiled and laughed as she turned to walk back into

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the kitchen. "Why wouldn't I be?" she said as she glanced back at Alex over her shoulder.

Alex couldn't take his eyes off of Ivy as she walked away. Everything seemed to go into slow-motion again as she turned her head. He watched as she tucked her long brown hair behind her right ear and smiled. It was a classic sexy move.

"Oh, that's nice, brain," he said to himself as she walked out of his sight. "Tucking the hair behind one ear... classic."

Alex sat in his booth, enjoying his coffee by himself. *This seems like a fairly uneventful dream*, he thought as the crowd of attractive people in front of him mingled amongst themselves. Alex had just finished his cappuccino when he heard an odd sound coming from the far corner of the room. He stood up and walked over to see just what it was.

The sound Alex heard kept getting louder and louder as he walked. He was now fairly certain it was someone singing. "What the hell is going on now?" he asked himself as he looked up at something very strange. He stared into the corner of the Brick House that had formerly held a television. It now held a jukebox, blaring a song that kept getting louder as he approached it. "*Wake me up before you go-go*" kept playing over and over and kept getting louder and louder. Alex walked right up to the jukebox and tried to read something written across the screen on the front. He read the words "Wake up" and realized what was going on. "Oh crap!"

Alex sat up on his bed like someone had stabbed him. "Oh crap," he said again... this time while he was awake. He could

immediately tell from the amount of light in the room from his tiny window that it was nighttime. He had the sinking feeling he was late for the party. He grabbed his phone, which was still singing *Wham* as loudly as possible and pressed a button without looking at the screen. The song stopped playing and Alex attempted to gather his thoughts. He was still very drowsy from the pills.

“Okay, that was apparently a long nap, but I’m not late for the party. There’s no way I slept that long,” he said as he prepared himself to look at his phone to see the time. He took a deep breath and looked down at his phone. He was only fifteen minutes late, but he was still running behind. “This is nothing. I haven’t missed anything yet.” He jumped up, threw on his new clothes, and was ready to leave in a matter of minutes. He gathered his things from the table next to his bed, put on his watch, and walked out into the hallway to Dale’s door.

Alex was just about to knock on Dale’s door when he noticed a note hanging from it. He took it down and read it as he stood alone in the hallway.

“Dude, gone to the party. Sent you a text. Never heard from you.”

Alex pulled out his phone and sure enough there was a message from Dale.

“Are you dead in there? I knocked on your door for a while, but you never answered. I’m going to the party. See you there.”

Alex shoved the note in his pocket and headed for the elevator. “Damnit!” he said as he rode the elevator down to the

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lobby. “Now how the hell am I going to get to the Brick House?” He walked out of the lobby and onto the steps in front of the H.U.B. *I guess I’m going to do this one on foot.*

Alex started running along the same path he had taken so many mornings before when he was late for class. If he wasn’t going to drive he sure as hell didn’t have to stick to the roads. The fastest way to the Brick House was straight across campus, so he started running in that direction.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The air was getting colder as Alex ran across campus. It wasn't a terribly long run to the Brick House under normal conditions, but the weather at the moment was far from normal. There was enough snow on the ground for Alex to assume it had been snowing for hours and it was still steadily coming down all around him.

"Not exactly the best time for a jog," Alex said to himself as he passed the Edward J. Aberthanian building. He found a good pace so that he wouldn't give out before he got to the Brick House and settled in for his journey. *Surely I can get there in less than fifteen minutes.*

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Alex took this time alone to think back to his drug-induced coma dream from earlier. There was something strange about it that he couldn't quite figure out. *Something was different*, he thought to himself as he made his way across one of the campus parking lots. He thought back to all of the beautiful people who filled the café. He thought back to how hot the red-head was who had seated him. He thought back to how beautiful Ivy was as she smiled and tossed back her hair. *That girl is something else.*

Alex was smiling as he ran across the street to the curb on the other side. There wasn't a lot of traffic out right now because of the weather, and the cars that were out were few and far between. Alex could think of nothing else as he ran, only Ivy. Just then he stopped running and stood completely still right in front of a flower shop. He had figured out what was so strange about his dream. "It was her," he said to himself as he stood there in the cold. "It was Ivy. She was what was different."

Alex's mind was running wild as it searched through a replay of his many different dreams and daydreams he had experienced over the last several months. None of them was special. None of them stood out. Yes, there were some good ones and some really sexy ones, but none that stood out. Each girl in each previous dream was as anonymous as possible. She was made up of the face of one girl and the body of another. Alex's mind would just pick and choose what it thought Alex wanted. Even the Brick House Café in his dream was filled with supermodels and half-naked women. This one was finally different. He thought back to Ivy when she walked away from his table. In a room full of swimsuits, ski-outfits, and cheerleader uniforms Ivy was standing there in jeans, a t-shirt, and a Brick House Café apron. It was perfect. Apparently

Alex's mind had decided that what he really wanted was Ivy.

Alex, not one to argue with his own brain, started running again. "This is it," he said as he turned onto Broad Street. "This is that scene in the movie where the main character figures out that he loves the girl and runs to catch her." He looked down as he continued to run towards the café. "Holy crap! I'm actually *running to catch her!*" he shouted as he realized what was going on. He was running to catch Ivy. The Brick House was within his sight now and he started to slow down.

I need to catch my breath before I walk in or they will wonder if I ran all the way over here. Alex adjusted his collar and shook the snow off of his sweater as he realized he *had* ran all the way over here. He smiled and laughed as he opened the front door of the Brick House Café.

The atmosphere inside the café was unbelievable. Christmas and the end of the semester were both in full bloom and you could see it, hear it, and smell it as soon as you walked through the door. There were lights strung from the ceiling and a tree decorated to the fullest right in the center of the room. Christmas carols were playing over the speakers and *Scrooged* was showing on every television in the place. You couldn't have squeezed one more ounce of celebration into that building without it bursting. Alex waved to a few people he knew as he looked around the room for Dale.

"Over here!" Dale shouted from the far corner of the room.

Alex waved to Dale, acknowledging he had located him, and attempted to make his way across the room to his table. It took

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him several minutes to get through all of the people he knew on his way to the other side. He finally made it to the table just as the waitress came over to get their orders.

“Took you long enough, Alex,” Dale said as he handed his menu to the waitress. “I’ll have the peppermint mocha and a slice of carrot cake, please.”

The waitress wrote down Dale’s order and turned to Alex. “And for you?”

Now a master of “winging-it,” Alex responded with a simple, “I’ll have the same.”

The waitress walked away to get their orders and Alex pulled out a chair to sit down.

“It’s packed in here, man. I can’t believe the turnout,” Alex said as he sat in his chair.

“Yep, this is the place to be,” Dale added as he looked around the room. “What took you so long to get here? I tried to catch you before I left, but you never responded.”

“I was asleep, man. I borrowed some pills for my headache this afternoon and didn’t realize they were night-time,” Alex explained as he scanned the room with Dale. “Tom must be having a blast with all of these people in here. Where is he, anyway?”

“I saw Tom about twenty minutes ago behind the counter working the register,” Dale added as the waitress returned with

their drinks and cake. "I'm sure it's a busy night. He mentioned something about having to find some more marshmallows for the hot chocolates or something. He's probably in the back... Hey, did you see Ivy on your way in?"

Alex took a sip of his coffee and turned to face Dale. "Did I see her? Where? I assumed she would be here."

Dale took a rather large bite out of his slice of carrot cake and decided to answer Alex whilst in the middle of chewing. Crumbs fell here and there as Alex attempted to interpret what Dale was mumbling. "She was looking for me?" Alex asked as he repeated Dale's gibberish back to him. "Did you say she was looking for me?"

Dale washed down his rather large bite of cake with a rather large drink of his peppermint mocha and restated to Alex, "Yes, she was looking for you. I was saying that she came over here when she first walked in and was asking where you were. I explained to her how I tried to wake you up, but you wouldn't respond and you were left at the dorms. She told me she was going to get in her car and drive back to the dorms because she was afraid you would try to walk here in the snow."

"Actually I *ran*," Alex said under his breath.

"What?" Dale asked. It was hard to hear in the Brick House tonight with all of the music and chatter. "What did you say?"

"Nothing, man. When did she leave? Alex asked as he scanned the room again, this time looking for Ivy.

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"I don't know," Dale said as he took another bite of his cake. "I'd say it was within the last ten minutes."

Alex turned back to Dale with a determined look on his face. "Give me your keys. I need to borrow your car."

Dale looked puzzled, but pulled out his keys nonetheless. "Where are you going?" he asked as he handed his keys to Alex. "She'll come right back after she sees you aren't in the dorms."

Alex thought about the truth behind Dale's statement and decided he should just text Ivy and let her know that he was already at the Brick House. He reached inside of his pants' pocket for his phone and found nothing. He checked the other pocket and came up with the same. "Crap! I left my phone in the dorm."

Dale pulled out his phone and offered it to Alex to use to contact Ivy, but he refused it.

"No, I have to find her now. This is fate. I've seen this ending before in too many movies. I have to find her," Alex explained as Dale stared back at him with a very puzzled look.

"Find her and do what?" Dale asked. "Follow her back over here in my car. This is dumb. Just wait and she will come back."

Alex had already made up his mind. He was going to find Ivy. It was his movie ending he had always wanted. He thought about how many snowy endings he had seen where the guy and the girl meet up on a bridge or something. He had to go.

"Thanks for the car," Alex said as he turned and began to fight his way across the café. Dale just sipped on his mocha and shook his head as Alex walked away.

"That guy waits until it snows to drive my car," Dale said to himself as their waitress walked back up to their table.

"How is everything over here?" she asked as she looked at the two plates on the table and the one person sitting with them.

"Everything is great over here, dear," Dale said as he reached across the table and pulled Alex's unfinished slice of carrot cake in front of him. "Great."

Alex was already pulling out of the parking lot by the time Dale had "borrowed" his cake. He had just turned off of Broad Street and was no more than a mile onto Northfield Boulevard when he was forced to stop in the middle of the street. He was in such a hurry that he hadn't even noticed the long line of cars directly ahead of him and stretching out all the way down Northfield. People were starting to get out of their cars and walk around. Whatever happened up ahead had traffic at a stand-still.

This is just great, Alex thought to himself as he put Dale's Corolla in park and opened his door. *I am on a quest here, people. I have to find Ivy.*

Alex's mind finally caught up to what he had just said. He fought back the thoughts that suddenly appeared in his head. *No... wait a minute,* he thought to himself as he started walking

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towards the front of the line of cars. *Don't even think like that, Alex. It's probably just a broken traffic light or something.*

He kept walking and his mind kept going crazy. He worked himself into such a frenzy that he found himself running again. He ran as fast as he could up to the front of the line of cars where a large group of people had formed. As he stepped closer he suddenly realized what happened.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The coolness of the morning lingered as noon steadily approached. The entire city of Northfield seemed to be covered with a single cloud that loomed overhead for miles in every direction. Any stranger could feel the sadness in the air without any explanation. If the feeling wasn't enough, the long line of cars driving towards the Northfield cemetery explained everything. A lone hearse led the long line of cars toward the front gates as they slowly made their way down Thompson Avenue and past Haile University. Other drivers pulled to the side of the street to show their respect as the mourners passed by them. A chill ran up Alex's spine as he stood at the cemetery watching the hearse and its followers file in. The cool air

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couldn't possibly numb him anymore than he already was; he barely felt the cold.

Six men emerged from the car just behind the hearse and stood ready to carry the casket from the car to the grave. Alex could barely watch. It felt like he was standing at his own funeral watching it all unfold as he was lying there inside the casket. The man closest to the car opened the back door and the other five men quickly joined in to take their places. The pallbearers carried the casket slowly toward the grave just in front of the crowd who had just taken their seats. The entire scene was a blur, slow motion from start to finish, but a blur just the same. Alex took a seat alongside Dale and Fax in the back row of the chairs that had been setup for the service. A small smile crept onto Alex's face as he noticed that his *back-seat warrior* tendencies even held true at a funeral. A small, elderly preacher arose from his seat and made his way to the front of the group, just in front of the casket. He cleared his throat and began what Alex assumed was definitely not an easy job.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming today. It is so very important to gather together at times such as this to help each other grieve. So often, the ones that we care about the most are taken from us suddenly, and without warning. There is little we can do to prevent this and, when an instance like this occurs, we owe it to those we have lost to gather and mourn. We owe it to those that have moved on to gather and reflect. We owe it to those that are no longer with us to gather and remember." The crowd was silent as the preacher turned to place his hand on the casket behind him. Alex was not someone that cried often. He didn't try to hold it in, he just didn't cry easily. This day was very different. This moment was very different. Alex was very different. He had changed. The last few weeks had changed

everything that Alex thought he knew so well. He found a purpose. He found a meaning. Alex had an idea about what to do with his life, however vague it may have seemed to others. He finally knew what it was like to care about someone, and to be cared for in return. He finally understood what his mind had been telling him all along in his dreams. Everything made sense now, or at least it did right up until two nights ago. As far as Alex was concerned, everything was perfect up until two nights ago. Everything changed so quickly.

The Christmas party at the Brick House was great, for almost fifteen minutes. Everything after that went downhill, and quickly. The accident that had traffic stopped on his way back to the dorms was much more serious than Alex had ever anticipated. When he finally made his way to the center of the traffic jam he stood in silence for what seemed to be an eternity. Everything changed so quickly. The snow had stopped falling completely, but the chill of the storm that had just passed through lingered through the busy streets. People huddled in groups around a car that had flipped over in the street in front of them. The treads in the snow clearly showed what had happened just moments earlier. A large van had apparently ran a red light and caught the small car beginning to cross the intersection and sent it flying across the street and into a ditch. Large sections of the road were cleared entirely of snow where the two vehicles slid as they slammed their breaks in an attempt to avoid the collision. The siren of an ambulance in the distance was the only sound on the crowded street. The blue lights from two police cars just arriving on the scene attempted to distract everyone from the terrible sight before them, but no one looked away. Alex stood frozen as he stared at the tires still spinning on

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the car upside down in the ditch before him. He wanted to cry, he wanted to scream, and he wanted to help. He wanted to do something, but everyone knew it was too late. The driver of the small car was dead. Alex was paralyzed in his gaze as he watched the tires spin and spin. He couldn't look away. He locked onto the tires to keep from looking at the body lying just in front of the car ahead of him. He knew as long as he stared at the spinning tires, he wouldn't have to stare at what he knew was there on the ground. He couldn't look down. He wouldn't.

The preacher gently tapped the top of the coffin and turned again to face the crowd.

"We all know what we have lost here today. Everyone has come for his or her own reasons, but we all share in our loss." He turned again to the coffin, gazing at it as if it may have had something to say to him, something to make this easier. The crowd stared along with him, hoping and praying for something to make it easier on them as well. Nothing came, and the preacher turned back around to the crowd to finish his task as best he could.

"Tom was a good man. He was an honest man. Those who knew him loved him. Those who did not know him have sadly missed out on one of God's kindest creatures."

Many of Tom's family turned to each other to hold one another at this statement, wiping away tears as they tried their best to keep it together while the preacher continued.

"Many of you know Tom from his work at his coffee house. I have known Tom for almost twenty years now. That coffee

house meant the world to him. I know he would appreciate how each and every one of you came out today. He would have also appreciated each and every one of you coming in and getting a hot cup of something on this terribly chilly afternoon.”

Everyone laughed quietly as the preacher looked up and smiled after this remark.

“It is okay to be sad on this day, my friends. This is truly a day of great loss, but we must also remember to rejoice in the life that Tom led. He was so proud of his family and of his life’s work. Days like today didn’t just mean more business to Tom. He knew that everyone would come into his store to escape the cold, but sales did not give him his greatest joy. He often told me how much he enjoyed watching people gather and laugh together as they sat in his café. He loved his family and he loved his life. He loved being able to touch other people’s daily lives in whatever seemingly miniscule way he could. I personally know that my day is nothing until I have my morning cup of coffee. Am I correct in assuming that several of you share this feeling with me?” he asked as he surveyed the mourners looking back at him. “I often stopped in at the Brick House in the mornings to start my day. Tom was always there to greet me with a big smile and an honest ‘Good morning.’ He knew how he impacted others’ lives and he cherished it.”

The crowd collectively smiled and thought back to the many times they had seen Tom’s smiling face as he handed them their morning coffee. You could see the impact throughout the crowd as the preacher’s words hit home.

“My goal for today is not to tell you anything new about Tom Preston. You all obviously knew him well. I simply want you to

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remember Tom and how he touched your world. Remember every smile and remember every kind word. Remember his loving family in all of your prayers. Let Tom Preston be an example to all of us on how to enjoy life and cherish our contributions to the world. Some people could have easily mistaken Tom for a simple coffee shop owner. Tom was so much more. Tom loved the life he lived. That is nothing simple. If only we were all able to say that we were truly happy with our lives. Let Tom's life be an inspiration to us all."

Alex sat in silence as the preacher led a short prayer before the coffin was lowered into the earth. Tears rolled uncontrollably down Alex's face. Everything changed so quickly. Alex felt a finger slide slowly across his face and looked up as Ivy wiped the tears from his cheeks.

"I got here as soon as I could," she said as he gazed up into her eyes. "I walked up just as he was starting and just stood in the back so I wouldn't interrupt him by trying to find a seat."

"Its okay," Alex replied as he stood and hugged Ivy. "It was a really nice service."

"Yeah, Tom would have been really happy to see this many people show up. He loved this town and everyone in it," Ivy said as she wiped some of her own tears from her cheeks.

Alex smiled as he started to appreciate the words Ivy just spoke. He was sure she had not intentionally made such a significant point, but often times less truly is more. *I think I really get it now*, Alex thought to himself as he held Ivy close to his chest. *Tom had it all figured out.*

Alex finally understood what Tom meant by “The ones you knew would come.” It seemed to make perfect sense now. No one can ever truly know his place in the world through every day events. People develop routines too easily. Saying “hello” was barely even a greeting anymore. It was just a habit to most people. Tom always said you could tell who your true friends were with a simple test. Imagine you were getting married tomorrow, who would come? Which of your friends would you want to be there? Which of your friends would you be sure wouldn’t miss it for anything in the world? Who would come to your funeral? Alex thought back on the many conversations he had with Tom at the Brick House and looked around at the enormous crowd of people walking away from the gravesite.

“Tom would be glad to see how many people showed up, Ivy,” Alex whispered as he kissed Ivy on her forehead. “He said he had a list in his mind of the ones he knew would come, but the extras were just proof that you did something right.”

Ivy looked up into Alex’s eyes with a smile. “You’re a good man, Alex,” she said as he looked back down into her eyes.

Alex paused as he stared down into Ivy’s eyes. He found himself caught in her gaze and lost in her beauty. He felt awkward feeling such a rush of love and joy while standing at a funeral, but he tried to remember that Tom would have wanted him to be happy. He cared about Ivy so much. He wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to feel the way she made him feel. He also wanted to make sure and say the right thing in response to her “you’re a good man” comment. A comment like that requires the perfect reply, and Alex was now an expert at “winging it” after his incident in his Intro to Business class just

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days earlier. He decided to go for it. He broke free of her gaze and pulled her in close to him again and delivered his carefully chosen line...

"You aren't too shabby yourself, my dear," he smirked with a crooked grin.

Ivy simply laughed and hugged him even tighter than before. Alex held her tightly as they stood in the back row as people made their way to their cars. Everything changed so quickly.

Later that evening, after Ivy had gone home, Alex and Dale walked out into the courtyard outside the HUB for some fresh air. The campus had already started to clear out somewhat for the Christmas holiday break. The sidewalks had been cleared since the last snowfall on Friday evening, but there were still several patches of untouched snow on the grassy areas in between paths. Alex and Dale sat on two benches that faced what was normally a beautiful arrangement of brightly colored flowers in the middle of the courtyard. Under the current weather conditions it looked more like a poorly designed snowman, but it had a beauty to it nonetheless. There was little left to be said after the day's events, and the two of them sat in silence for a long time before any conversation came about.

"Hey, I found out from that weird guy in the row in front of us in Western Civ. that we can look at our grades first thing tomorrow morning," Dale mentioned quietly for no reason other than to break the silence.

"That's good," Alex replied as he continued to stare at the abstract snowy beast in front of them. "My Intro to Business

grade was posted early this morning when I was checking my email. I passed the class. I actually ended up with a 'B' overall."

"That's great, man. Congrats."

"Thanks. You know that big project that I worked so hard on and basically made up as I presented it?" Alex asked, still staring ahead.

"Yeah, the one about your career?"

"Yep, that's the one. I got the second highest grade in the class." Alex said as he laughed to himself. "Can you believe that crap? I get up there and make it all up as I go and get the second highest grade in the class."

"That's how it works, man. College is a waste of time," Dale added, also staring at the pile of snow in front of them.

"I couldn't agree more," Alex proclaimed as he tilted his head to the side in an attempt to get a better angle on the snow covered mess before him. "I learned more from Tom than I did from any of my professors this semester. And, Tom was free."

"Well, you had to pay for the coffee," Dale added as he too tilted his head just as Alex had done.

The two sat there and simultaneously tilted their heads to the other side, still mesmerized by the mass of chaos they had discovered.

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“Hey, man. How did you not get the highest grade in the class?” Dale asked. “I thought you said the whole room ate it up when you lost it and started making stuff up. You said you were a hit.”

“Oh, I was a hit alright. The entire classroom started clapping when I was done. I even saw Mrs. Archer clapping before she noticed what she was doing and quickly tried to hide her enthusiasm for such chaotic classroom behavior.”

“Who got the highest grade? I don’t see how you missed out.”

“Well, there was some girl who had a fifteen minute presentation about how she always dreamed of being a college professor. She was really laying it on thick,” Alex said as he crossed his arms to try and warm himself.

They both sat on the bench, still staring at the object in front of them, both with their arms crossed to try and warm up. Dale turned his head to the side to face Alex, who was still staring ahead.

“Well, for every back-row warrior there are two front-row brown-nosers just waiting for their moment to strike,” Dale said with a serious look on his face. He uncrossed his arms and placed his hand on Alex’s shoulder. “That’s why we do what we do, sir. Someone has to fill those seats in the back rows.”

Dale continued to stare at Alex, awaiting a response. Alex turned to face Dale with a smile.

“You make an excellent point, my dear sir,” Alex said as he stared back at Dale with a serious look of his own. “It’s our duty. We must spread the gospel of the back-row warriors.”

“Amen, brother,” Dale shouted as they both turned back towards the dead flower garden in the center of the courtyard.

“Amen.”